

Hope Lutheran Church  
Second Sunday of Easter

April 11/12, 2015  
John 20:19-31

*“An Example of Courageous Faith”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

A few weeks ago, just before Holy Week and Easter, when the annual “Biblepalooza” of religious broadcasts hits the air, I forced myself to watch the CNN broadcast: *“Atheists: Inside the World of Non-Believers.”* I say *“forced myself to watch”* because CNN and most major media companies are not known for objectivity when it comes to any presentation related to Christianity! But more personally, I *“forced myself to watch”* because I would rather live in my safe, Christian cocoon rather than face my own personal doubts and questions, or deal with the reality that there are growing numbers of people out there who reject the teachings of our faith, including some of our own family members and friends.

Now that’s an honest confession, from a pastor no less, identifying I think with every person in this room whose faith has ever been challenged; whose questions have gone unanswered; whose spiritual journey has been marked by periods of struggle and skepticism; whose inner soul and spirit has yearned for confirmation that what we believe is really true! Inside the heart of every Christian there are moments of conflict and question about matters of faith, even though we boldly confess: *“I believe!”*

Maybe that's why the lectionary on the Sunday following Easter always takes us to a room where "*on the evening of that day, [Easter Day] the first day of the week, the fearful disciples of Jesus were hiding behind locked doors!*" (John 20:19) Maybe that's why we get this real, raw, authentic look at Thomas who has a bout with doubt, challenging, questioning, seeking proof before he is ready to believe that the Risen Lord just popped into the room saying, "*Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you...receive the Holy Spirit.*" (John 20:21-22) Thomas is not quite ready to "go" is he; not yet committed to being "*all in;*" not ready to believe what he not "*seen with his own eyes!*" (John 20:25)

And I say today, "*Thank God for Thomas,*" because he's Preston, he's every Jesus follower; every one of us who need a safe place to learn and grow and personally experience what it means to walk in the newness of life! That is indeed what Easter brings – newness of life, forgiveness of sins, salvation, everlasting hope and peace - the celebration of Christ's victory over sin and death diminished not one iota because of our honest struggles and deep questions. Easter assures us in the midst of our doubts, our fears sometimes overwhelming, that the Risen Lord is still present in our lives, repeating the greeting to his followers over and over again: "*Peace be with you!*" (John 20:26)

Those words of Jesus, spoken twice to the disciples when huddled in fear, and repeated to Thomas when he was present eight days later, have always been precious to me in

my walk with God. You see, if the disciples could be so fearful and uncertain, if Thomas could be this vulnerable and open in his faith journey, then so can you and I! If Jesus, the Crucified Savior and Risen Lord reaches out to a questioning and struggling follower like Thomas with assurances of peace, inviting him to “*touch*” and “*see,*” then surely we can come to Jesus “*just as we are, without one plea!*” Is this not what we so often sing in that hymn of invitation?

*Just as I am, though tossed about  
with many a conflict, many a doubt,  
fighting's and fears within, without,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!”*

So, in my mind, instead of Thomas being known as the poster child of doubt, Thomas is instead **a courageous example of the faith**, baring his soul before the Lord, yet confessing, “*My Lord and my God!*” (John 20:28) You see, my friends, this Christian faith we affirm is not a bunch of holy, pious, perfect people sitting around experiencing “*complete joy*” (1 John 1:4) all the time; we are not a church where we are always of “*one heart and soul and have everything in common!*” (Acts 2:32) No, we get fearful; we have questions; we’re unsure; we’re hypocritical; we’re sinners “*saved by grace through faith alone*” who “*believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing have life in his name.*” (John 20:31)

I had never thought about this much before, but why wasn’t Thomas in the room that first Easter night? The

Bible doesn't tell us and speculation is just that, but maybe in his absence Thomas was being courageous, not hiding; maybe looking out for Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women who had come to the tomb earlier that day? Maybe Thomas was out there getting food for all those slacker disciples who had the door locked? Speculation, sure, but John's Gospel earlier recorded that when the disciples didn't want Jesus to go to help their friend Lazarus who had died, because the circumstances with the Jewish leaders were tense and the situation was fraught with danger, it was none other than Thomas who spoke up saying, "*Let us also go, that we may die with him.*" (John 11:16) To which the footnote in my study Bible reads: "*We usually remember Thomas for his doubting, but he was also capable of devotion and courage.*" (Concordia Self Study Bible) So am I! So are you!

Thomas becomes then not a symbol of faithlessness and doubt, but a disciple who displays honest struggle and true courage. When Thomas declared, "*Unless I see with my own eyes and touch with my own hands,*" (John 20:25) was he not expecting that Jesus would care enough to show up a second time...a third time...an umpteenth time...to "*breathe the power of the Holy Spirit*" (John 20:22) on him – and on us, His baptized children of faith! We dare not make Thomas the scapegoat for doubt, or an infidel for questioning, for then how would you, how would I ever hear the invitation of the Risen Lord: "*Come here...touch, see...do not be faithless, but believing!*" Come here, with your struggles, doubts, questions, fears, mistakes, sins, setbacks and

disappointments, seeing once again my nail-scarred hands and wounded side, my voice echoing the words: *Peace be with you!*”

Do you not understand, my friends, how unique and radical this Christian faith we profess? Our Lord invites sinners and scoundrels and death-bed thieves, doubters and deniers to come to Him, trusting that Calvary’s Cross and Easter’s empty tomb is what makes the journey of faith possible. God never promises us all the answers but He fully shows us the Savior who is “*the way, the truth and the life!*” (John 14:6) Salvation is not about how many times we come to church or kneel to pray or how perfect we are in keeping every rule and ritual! It’s not about intellect or proof or blind obedience because faith is always about this gift of the Holy Spirit called “*trust!*”

I “*trust*” you Jesus, even when I don’t always understand; even when circumstances are cruddy; even when it makes no sense and the world seemingly scoffs at what I believe; even when sin gets the better of me; even when death is lapping at my heels - I “*trust*” you Jesus! Because you, Risen Lord and Savior, Coming King are the only God out there who keeps breaking down the barricades of sin and fear, popping into rooms just like this – to people just like us, saying “*peace be with you...as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you [YOU!]*” to be **examples of courageous faith!**

*The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed, alleluia!* Now go live like you believe it! AMEN.