

10 May 2009

## A Bad Rap

John 20:24-31

Few things are harder to take than disillusionment. We see a lot of it around us today in the news, in our economy, maybe even in our own lives. Disillusionment in the church tends to be hardest on the most sincerely faithful—the passionate—the ones most likely to be committed and sacrificial. I've said here before that if you peel back the crusty exterior of a cynic, what you're likely to find is a wounded idealist.

Disillusionment—what the dictionary refers to as 'to cause to lose faith and trust'—disillusionment is the result of having our faith and trust stretched beyond the breaking point.

Our text this morning tells the story of a disillusioned disciple. It also shows us what God offers to restore our faith.

*24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."*

*26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

*28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"*

*29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

So we've been looking at the events right after the catastrophe of Holy Week. Jesus' disciples, who had followed him for years, along with the other believers, are trying to figure out what to do next. They'd followed Jesus into Jerusalem hoping that he'd take over, that he'd overthrow Rome and establish his kingdom—they'd hoped for all that, only to see him arrested and beaten and humiliated and killed.

But then there was the empty tomb—the resurrection of Jesus had kept his followers off-balance—even the ones who had seen him with their own eyes. In the passage right before ours, Jesus enters a room where most of the disciples were gathering for a meal, and he showed them his hands and side and ate with them. The reports spread to the people outside the inner circle, and the news eventually made it to Thomas. 'We have seen the Lord', his friends told him.

But Thomas wasn't buying any of it. Thomas had his faith and trust stretched beyond the breaking point, and so he responds to Jesus with a fairly modern question. He asks for evidence—he asks for a sign that what he believes is true—that what he had trusted is real. There's a little scientific method going on here—Thomas wants to examine the data

and see if they all add up.

As we continue this series of Easter messages that will take us into Pentecost, it's good to be reminded of what we continue to celebrate during this season:

We celebrate Easter to remember the miraculous raising from the dead of Jesus the Messiah—God in human form, who came and lived and served and loved and died in order to demonstrate the depth of God's love for all of his creation.

That's our baseline—the foundation for whatever else we might say in this season or any season. At Easter we celebrate the lengths God will go to in order to demonstrate his love for us.

Thomas the disciple had a hard time believing that anything good could come out of the horrible experience of seeing the painful death of his friend and teacher. We've come to know him as 'Doubting Thomas', which I think is a bit unfair.

It's unfair because it doesn't reconcile with the only other story we have of Thomas as a disciple. In John 11:16, after several years of traveling in the countryside, Jesus decides that it's time to go to Jerusalem. The other disciples tried to convince Jesus not to go—returning to Jerusalem was dangerous—they tried to save themselves, but Thomas said: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' In other words: In for a penny, in for a pound. Not exactly the behavior of a skeptic.

Identifying Thomas by his doubts at the end of Jesus' ministry is a bad rap—it's a charge that might be true on its face, but doesn't really get the whole story. Thomas was brave when the rest showed cowardice. He was faithful and passionate and strong, when the others waffled and squabbled about who got the best seat next to Jesus in heaven. When it all went sideways, who can blame him for feeling a little disillusioned? He was faithful and passionate and committed and sacrificial—but he was also human. Identifying Thomas simply by his doubts at the end of Jesus' ministry isn't fair at all.

Besides, it ignores two main parts of the big picture as we see it now.

First, even Jesus doesn't curse Thomas for wanting to see—he just says he'd be happier (that's the meaning of 'blessed' here) if he had been able to believe without seeing. That's not exactly condemnation—it sounds like Jesus is pastoring his friend pretty well here.

Second, when we focus on Thomas' doubts we forget where we are in this story. We said a few weeks ago that the Atonement is really a drama in three acts: the Cross, the Resurrection and Pentecost, or the gift of the Holy Spirit. When we neglect the way those three work together—how essential each part is to God's plan for us—we risk misunderstanding the story entirely. Here's the bottom line: Thomas couldn't experience Pentecost—he couldn't enjoy the third act of this great drama—until the Risen Christ had been taken up into heaven.

I can put that another way. Thomas wanted to experience the presence and power of Christ in a real way. What he didn't know was that that was exactly what Christ was about to offer him.

For understanding this we get some help from an unlikely source. I warned you all a month or so ago that since this is the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, we'll be checking in with him along the way to see if he offers any help.

Calvin talks about the need for Jesus to leave behind the limitations of being a physical person, so that his Spirit could come to teach and inspire and empower the people of God for the new task ahead.

He wrote: 'For Christ left us in such a way that his presence might be more useful to us—a presence that had been confined in a humble abode of flesh so long as he sojourned on earth.'

You heard a little about Christ's return to heaven last week. Here's Calvin's take on that event:

'Carried up into heaven, therefore, he withdrew his bodily presence from our sight, not to cease to be present with believers still on their earthly pilgrimage, but to rule heaven and earth with a more immediate power...by his ascension he fulfilled what he had promised: that he would be with us even to the end of the world.'

In other words, we're faced with a paradox—something that is counter-intuitive—something that might not make sense on the surface. With the gift of the Holy Spirit we experience more of the fullness of Christ than if he were here in bodily form. It's sort of like the difference between a performer doing a show with each member of the audience individually, as opposed to broadcasting on TV or radio.

So back to Thomas. It's important for us to understand that Thomas wasn't condemned for his doubts. Thomas was scolded a little for missing the point—for under-asking. Jesus was offering a radical, world-changing gift, and Thomas just wanted everything to be like it had been before.

A lot of you know already that I used to work in Christian non-profits as a fund raiser. Every fund raiser has a story about under asking—about meeting someone and cultivating a gift, only to make the mistake of not asking for a gift that matches the commitment of the donor. You know when it happens, because they say 'yes' very quickly. Professional development officers call this 'leaving money on the table.'

In that sense the problem might not exactly add up to an inability to believe. Instead, like Thomas, our doubts might actually be an inability or unwillingness to hope that Christ really is who he said he is—that he'll really do what he promised to do. Christ was there, ready to offer something amazing in the form of the Holy Spirit, and Thomas left money on the table.

But notice how Jesus responded to Thomas when he said, 'yeah, I'll believe it when I can see it—when I can touch it for myself.' Notice what Jesus did. He said: 'Peace be with you—my Shalom be with you. See my hands—touch my side. Stop doubting and believe'

Christ makes that same offer to us today. Oh, I don't think anyone here is going to touch the wounds of Jesus today, but through the work of the Holy Spirit—the third act of God's Atonement drama—through the Holy Spirit we come to this place, the body of Christ, where we find fellowship and worship and discipleship and a call to mission.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are called to be Christ's church here, in this time and in this place. To be the very presence of Christ for each other and for the world.

Because what Thomas really wanted was a reminder of Christ's presence—a sense that Christ cared and loved and could be trusted to do what he said he would do. The gift of the Holy Spirit, as it guides and empowers all people of faith, is exactly what Thomas wanted. It's exactly what we want from God, and in a few weeks, at Pentecost, we'll celebrate that the Spirit is God's response to our demand for a sign.

My prayer for all of us, as we move through these resurrection sightings into the season of Pentecost—my prayer for us is that we'll reach out and touch Christ as we find him in this community of faith.

That this church will be a tangible sign of God's love and faithfulness.

That we'll feel Christ's presence and be warmed in his Shalom.

That we'll stop doubting and believe.

That we will, at the very same time, bow before our God and look him in the eye as Thomas did, and say: 'My Lord and my God.'

For that we'll need a dose of Christ's grace—we'll need new hearts that are repaired and restored and renewed for the journey. Let's make that our prayer this morning. Let's stand and sing together: 'Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God'