

**1 Peter 1:3-9** <sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the genuineness of your faith-- being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire-- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup> Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup> for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

**John 20:19-31** <sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." <sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." <sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." <sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

## The Sunday After

Here we find ourselves sitting in the sanctuary on the week after Easter. This is the Sunday commonly referred to as associate pastor Sunday and marked with lower than average attendance. On top of that, we have the ING marathon making it even more difficult to come to church this morning. In our case today we may call it resident pastor Sunday since I am currently somewhere between the status of an intern and an associate pastor on that totem poll.

On the church calendar the season of Easter will last fifty days leading up to Pentecost. We will talk about Easter over the next six weeks. We will begin to describe how the resurrection, we began to celebrate last Sunday, makes a difference in our lives. But are we really still celebrating Easter? Are we going home after worship this morning to another big meal shared with family and friends the way we did last week? I sure am not. Have we moved on from Easter to the Sunday after?

Our lectionary reading from the Gospel of John brings us back to the story of Thomas. Jesus has appeared to his disciples in a room. Somehow he managed to enter and appear, though the doors were locked by the scared disciples inside. The narrative tells us that Thomas was not with them. Jesus breathes on the disciples so that they may receive the Holy Spirit and be sent out, empowered to spread the message of the gospel and serve. When Thomas was told by some of the disciples how they had seen the Lord he replied he would not believe the story he was hearing until he could touch and see the wounds Jesus endured in his execution.

A whole week goes by before anything else happens. The disciples are back in the locked house and Thomas is with them. Jesus does his little trick again and all the sudden is among the group. He must know what Thomas said to the other disciples because he calls him forward to come touch his hands and his side that were pierced in the crucifixion. Jesus does not scold Thomas but does say, “Do not doubt but believe. Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Thomas has received a bad rap over the years for his skepticism. The phrase “a doubting Thomas” carries a negative connotation with it today when used to describe someone else. I believe Jesus understood Thomas’ doubts. Doubting is after all a part of having faith. One cannot have faith and hope that a situation will work out unless that hope is accompanied by some doubt. Otherwise the outcome we desire is a sure thing and faith is not required. And when we turn to God through prayer, through community, and through service in those times of doubt we have the opportunity for discipleship.

As a resident funded by the Lilly Endowment I am expected to participate in an annual gathering of all the Lilly residents where we will discuss our experiences over the course of the previous year in ministry and learn from one another. In preparing for this conference in May, Lilly sent me several books to read to aid in our discussions together. One of the books is Tom Long’s, entitled *Testimony*. A section of the book describes how our doubts are not only a building block for our own faith but also serve as a means to empower and strengthen others in their journey of faith. A master storyteller, Dr. Long, who teaches homiletics here at Candler, begins this section with a story of a woman searching for some answers in her life. He tells how

she is not empowered by a talk show host who is unwilling or unable meet her in her doubt...[long quote from the book]

Do any of us have all the answers? No! What we do have to guide our feet on this journey of faith is our community. We have one another. We need each other. We need others to hold us accountable to the lives we wish to live. We need others to read and discuss scripture with us. We need others with whom we may share our testimony, people we may support who are dealing with troubling issues, who will in return strengthen our faith and our understanding of whom God is calling us to be.

The Gospel lesson we heard this morning is about finding hope in the resurrection. We will only find that hope and grow in our faith when we also have doubts. We may doubt the physical resurrection. We may doubt our loved one's chance to survive the cancer or our child's opportunity to succeed. We may doubt our chance to receive that promotion, that new job, that relationship, or ever heal from our grief. Jesus is not upset with Thomas for doubting. Jesus' response is the same for us today as it was for Thomas. "Do not doubt but believe." Through his doubting Thomas is able to make a stronger confession in who Christ is when he realized who came into the room to be with him. Thomas then refers to Jesus as my Lord and my God. Through doubting Thomas became a devoted disciple.

Just as Jesus has been sent out into the world by the father so too now he sends out his disciples empowered by the Spirit. And he grants them the ability to forgive or retain sin. This is as simple as choosing to accept or reject God's love and to love your neighbor. It is the same as the choice to hold grudges or to let go and move forward.

When the church celebrates Easter, it is celebrating the beginning of its mission in the world. It is not the Sunday after. This is the first Sunday of the mission of the church. Today is the beginning of our response to God's love and our new life. Today is our first day to get to work. Today we may choose to give our testimony by being present with those experiencing doubt and difficulty. It is Easter after all.

God has chosen us. May we as a community look for God's guidance and truth.