

2nd Sunday of Easter Yr A, 19/04/2020
John 20:19-31
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Reversals—faith and doubt, doubt and faith”

I begin today by sharing a quotation from a professor of New Testament, Jaime Clark-Soles: *In the end, it's not Thomas's "doubting" or demanding that matters; it's his believing. Everybody doubts; not everyone believes. Be a believing Thomas; push as hard as you need to until you are awestruck and moved to proclaim with him: "My Lord and my God!"*¹ When Professor Clark-Soles writes: “push as hard as you need to until you are awestruck and moved to proclaim with him: “My Lord and my God!” I think the point she is making is that doubt, as in the case of Thomas can be reversed and lead some people to faith.

At any rate, in the end, rather than scolding or condemning Thomas, the risen Jesus actually gives him the opportunity to set aside his doubts and touch Jesus' hands and side. It is rather interesting that John doesn't tell us if Thomas did touch Jesus or not. However, this passage inspired one Malaysian Christian artist, Hanna-Cheriyen Varghese to paint this scene, titled “Thomas.” (Those of you who have computers can find the painting here: <https://www.omsc.org/portfolio-hanna-varghese>) In the painting, Thomas is kneeling and looking up at the risen Jesus, and he does touch Jesus' hands. I like this painting for a couple of reasons.

First, right now with our situation of the coronavirus, we cannot meet together, and so for those who live alone, there is no opportunity to touch any other person. Our hope for the future is that one day we will be able to not only touch others, but touch Jesus too. The painting is meaningful in our present situation, because, I think—especially those who live alone—we realize how much we miss touching others by shaking their hands or hugging. The basic sense of touch brings joy and contentment to our lives.

Second, in this painting I interpret the looking up of Thomas at Jesus as a look of awe and wonder on his face and humility through his body language as he kneels in

¹ Jaime Clark-Soles, “Commentary on John 20:19-31,” at: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3222>.

front of Jesus. He seems to be amazed that the risen Jesus is alive and present in front of him. As I look at this painting and reflect on it, I wonder how you and I will respond and how will we feel, and what will we say when we actually get to see the risen Jesus in front of us? Something to think about—and hopefully look forward too!

Speaking of thinking, I think that today's gospel is one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament. In Jesus' encounter with Thomas, we are given two great truths, which are presented in the form of reversals.

The first great truth, put quite simply, is that scepticism and doubt lead to believing. Thomas demonstrates this very clearly when he states: "Unless I see in his hands the prints of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." That is one of the most honest statements of scepticism and doubt in the Bible. Many look upon scepticism and doubt as something negative. For Thomas and many others it is actually something quite positive. Only by expressing his doubts and letting them all hang out does Thomas come to believe.

This is also true of many other biblical characters. For example, Job doubted the way in which God seemed to govern the world. The writer of Ecclesiastes reveals the doubts of a wise and searching person. Jeremiah, in one of his prayers to God said: "Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail." (Jer 15:18) Lutheran Theologian, Paul Tillich, in his book *The Dynamics of Faith*, once said that faith and doubt are not opposites but different sides of the same coin. Without doubt, faith is not genuine, Tillich contended. In our contemporary world, there have been atheists and agnostics whose doubts and scepticism have led them to a strong belief in God. One of the most famous and highly respected ones was author, scholar and professor C.S. Lewis, who published many popular books read by hundreds and thousands of people, and likely making a difference among other agnostics and atheists—helping them through their scepticism and doubts and leading them, by the grace of God, into the Christian faith.

Our gospel today, in the person of Thomas, speaks to us by telling us it's quite alright to doubt and be a sceptic. Our God is not so small, or limited or vulnerable as to be destroyed or offended by our doubts. Life is a complicated mixture of doubt

and faith. We all have our days of doubt and scepticism as well as faith and hope. Thomas challenges each one of us to be honest with God, ourselves and others about our doubts and scepticism. In doing so, we are led to a deeper, more genuine faith in God.

The second great truth is: that those people are blessed who believe in the resurrected Christ without seeing. This is a tough one for us, because we live in a world where seeing is believing. An event takes place in our province, nation or world and we will not believe it until we have seen it on television or the internet or read about it in the newspaper.

Many of us are very deeply entrenched as seeing and touching Thomases. The irony of this is that what we see and hear on T.V. or online or read in the newspaper is not provable by us because we were not eye-witnesses to these events. We rely on the reporting of journalists who are biased and, in actuality, are only able to present incomplete portions of the events. Our reliance upon the reports of journalists is actually a form of faith on our part. Moreover, it is a faith which does not see or touch because we are not physically present at the event.

It is very interesting that when the resurrected Jesus did come to Thomas, there is no mention of Thomas touching Jesus even though he is given the opportunity. It may very well have been enough for him to see Jesus and believe.

Yet more interesting is Jesus' comment on believing without seeing. Jesus very quickly reminds Thomas that it is by far more difficult to believe without seeing than it is by seeing.

These words speak to us and our situation today. The blessed ones, according to this gospel passage, are those who believe without seeing. Those of us who have plodded along without dramatic visions or special religious experiences. Believing without seeing is difficult and risky, there are little, if any, extraordinary experiences upon which to base your faith or relieve you of the doubts which occasionally seem too much to handle. However, believing without seeing does make one keenly aware of the fact that belief comes from God as a gift, it is solely God's work, not ours. As Martin Luther put it: "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called

me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” (Luther’s explanation of The Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, in his *Small Catechism*)

Coming back to that painting by Hanna-Cheriyam Varghese again, there is a third message I see in it—it is in the way she had painted Jesus. She only shows part of his body, from below his shoulders downwards. His blood-stained hands are very prominent, his palms are open outwards toward Thomas in an inviting manner. The fact that Varghese does not show us Jesus’ upper body is intriguing. What is she saying to the viewer by this? Well, I interpret it to mean there is a deep mystery to the resurrection that we shall never fully comprehend in this earthly existence. That mystery is so much larger than any of us. It is not a mystery however that causes fear, anxiety and despair. No! Rather, it is a mystery, by virtue of those open, welcoming blood-stained hands that invites us into the love of God, the forgiveness of God, the grace of God. A mystery that will ultimately free us from the prison of COVID-19. A mystery that is far more powerful than COVID-19. A mystery that ultimately will defeat COVID-19 forever. For that, thanks be to God, for Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen!