

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
April 24, 2022  
John 20: 19-29

I entitled this sermon “A Delayed Rejoicing.” But I am not good at sermon titles. I select a title early in the week, and it is just a guess. I entitled the sermon “a delayed rejoicing” because I was thinking of Thomas. Thomas will come to believe and rejoice along with the others. He, too, will rejoice over the resurrection. And he will follow the call of an apostle along with the others, and tradition has it that he also will be martyred as a missionary. But he is not among the other disciples at first. He will have to wait longer, and his desire to touch the risen Christ and come to belief becomes more intense. He gets highlighted as an example for those who come after, who must come to believe without seeing themselves.

My title referred to Thomas. Because last Sunday was Easter, a Sunday when the disciples discover the empty tomb and rejoice. At least, that is the tone of our remembrance. However, in considering the events of Easter more closely, I wonder if all the disciples were not a little delayed in their rejoicing. Mary was convinced the body was stolen and kept lamenting this even to Christ himself, unaware she was speaking to Jesus. And when this morning’s gospel reading opens, it is evening on that first day of the week, “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear [of the Jews], Jesus came and stood among them.”

Jesus had to break into the house to reveal himself to them. They had heard the word that Jesus had risen. The women, by that time, had told the men that they had seen Jesus, and he was alive. They had heard. But they were still hiding out of fear. Because they doubted. Because they were confused. They were scared for their lives and living in the wake of that trauma, loss, and shock. They had locked themselves inside the room, and so when Jesus appeared to them, their hearts almost stopped. Until Jesus said, “Peace be with you.” It will be ok. They doubted and were confused and didn’t know what to think until Jesus showed them his hands and his side. They were paralyzed until Jesus breathed upon them the Holy Spirit and gave them work to do. He gave them the work of carrying forgiveness to others, even those we would be more prone to curse.

So, Thomas is not exceptional in this respect, only that he had to wait even longer. Because he was not among them when Jesus revealed himself for the first time. Like the other disciples, he was not satisfied just to hear about it from others. That was not enough to allay his doubts, fears, sense of loss, or disappointment. He

asserts, “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.”

Perhaps I should have entitled this sermon, “In Defense of Thomas,” because I like Thomas, and I think he finds a more mysterious and intimate connection with Christ because of his persistence. The problem is that Thomas is often cast as being wrong for doubting. “Doubting Thomas,” he has been dubbed. He somehow has less faith and is less open or faithful. When Jesus is quoted as saying not to doubt but to believe, this has often been interpreted that these two are a dichotomy, as mutually exclusive, belief and doubt. But I wonder if it wasn’t their doubt that propelled, guided, and deepened their belief. In fact, isn’t belief predicated upon uncertainty, some kind of missing data or information, some questioning, and yearning.

Now doubt may at times cause us to pull back. I don’t watch the Buffalo Bills anymore because I expect further disappointment and I doubt they will ever be in the Superbowl again. I don’t fact-check politicians because I doubt any facts are to be found. Yes, doubt can be an excuse at times for pulling back, not committing, or refusing to engage. But that is not what I hear coming from Thomas. He couldn’t believe just because the others had an encounter, he needed his own. So, his questions and his delayed rejoicing led him closer and more connected to Christ.

It wasn’t belief or confidence that took the women to the tomb in the early hours of the morning. It was sadness, grief, and confusion. But they were in a place to believe because they were there. And in that place, they came to grapple with and embrace a crucified savior. You see, saviors and leaders and messiahs aren’t supposed to die. They are not supposed to be marred with scars. And so, just believing without pondering, contemplating, and engaging is a low form of belief. Real belief takes some grappling. And it is in that grappling that we touch the mystery.

So yes, doubt can stand in opposition to belief if it causes us to pull away or not engage. But certainty can do the same thing. In fact, I wonder if it is certainty that stands in opposition to belief. Certainty can keep us from exploring, keep us from being confronted, keep us from grappling with deeper aspects of the faith journey. Certainty makes us act on old information. Certainty is scared of unknowns and changes and impenetrable to new information. But doubts and questions and desires, and yearnings have the potential to lead us deeper into Christ.

Doubts and questions and struggles can lead us to deeper places of understanding and a deeper commitment to follow. Thomas, and the others, could have pulled

away from Christ because they had believed in Jesus and their belief was disappointed. They could have allowed that rupture to break their faith for good. But by pressing through that to see and touch the risen Christ with his scars, their faith and their commitments deepen.

I think of the poem we have read in the past by Yehuda Amichai, where he suggests certainty is like packed ground where flowers cannot grow. But doubts and loves, he says, can till up the ground, break up the soil, allowing for new growth and life. Doubt and love. I think that is what drove Thomas' insistence on seeing the risen Christ for himself. His doubt was not intended to maintain control, to pull back, and not commit. No, I think his doubt put him in the place where he could believe more deeply. His doubt brought him to touch the one he loves. His doubts and questions and pain put him in a place where he could process and come to a new understanding of this savior who bears scars. And as Malcolm Guite says, to come to understand and connect with "the wounded God whose wounds are healing mine."

So, I don't like the way Jesus words have been interpreted, when he says "don't doubt, but belief" as if these are antithetical. But perhaps Jesus is inviting him past his questions into a deeper connection. Maybe Jesus was calling Thomas back to trust in him and to know that he is the Christ. Jesus had not abandoned him but was fulfilling the work he promised. Maybe he was calling Thomas back to that central connectedness and rootedness. Because even though it is often doubt and love that lead us deeper, there is a place for certainty.

Our Psalm this morning has the air of simple confidence, of Praise encompassing all things. It closes with the line, "Let everything that breathes Praise the Lord." This psalm is the closing psalm of the Psalter. It acts as a final statement, an endcap, a final refrain. Now the Psalter is full of all kinds of psalms and voices, including many of discontent and lament. But the last word is one of confidence and praise. "Praise the Lord! ...Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!" It is the type of confidence Paul declares in his letter to Timothy when he says: "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him until that day."

It is this type of certainty that keeps us rooted in relationship and faith despite the questions and challenges. It directs our questions and yearnings, not away from the Christ, but to the Christ. Certainty like confidence. Certainty in God's love, in Christ's trustworthiness, that will compel us to follow even despite our doubts, despite the twists and turns of the journey.

You see, two competing notions have clouded the concepts of faith and belief, in my opinion. On the one hand, our notions of faith have been shaped by the enlightenment, where everything is provable and concrete and straightforward if we just apply enough reason. Faith can always be underpinned by rational explanations and logical reasoning. So, we believe in the resurrection because the Discovery Channel can explain the scientific basis for how Jesus could have risen from the dead. On the other hand, there is this notion that faith is antithetical to doubt and questioning. You are just supposed to believe and not doubt or question or think too much. It encourages anti-intellectualism. Neither of these notions serve us well.

Now maybe it comes from the fact that I have spent too much time in poetry the last several years, Hebrew and otherwise. But my work in the poetry of the Bible and in engaging the scriptures alongside poetry makes me think of faith as less about certainty and more about a persistent engagement and insistence on a more profound experience and understanding. Poetry does not offer truth in an end-all-be-all manner. Poetry is not systematic theology, but poetry, rather, invites us into a white-hot moment of perspective or encounter.

Our scripture this morning is not written as poetry, but I think it is that white-hot moment of perspective and encounter that Thomas was looking for. And we are invited to seek it as well. Blessed are those who will believe, even though we will not be afforded the physical Christ in the process. Blessed are those whose yearning for good news, and forgiveness, and for a Christ who leads in ways that we don't always understand. Blessed are those whose doubts put them in a place where Christ might meet and lead. Blessed are those whose questions lead to compassion and insight.

So even if the rejoicing comes slow, I trust it will happen if we do not abandon our loves and our doubts but let them lead us to Christ. And perhaps in time, we will utter those words of Thomas with greater conviction and hope: "My Lord and my God!"

### *Jesus Appears to the Disciples*

*(Lk 24:36–43; 1 Cor 15:5)*

<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.”

### *Jesus and Thomas*

<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.”

### *The Purpose of This Book*

<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.