**4/16/23**

**“Do not doubt but believe.”**

**John 20:19-31**

Good Morning everyone! May continued Easter Blessings be granted to one and all. For we are forever thankful that Christ has Risen! He has Risen Indeed! Amen.

I don’t think we just went through all of the ups and downs of Holy Week just to get to the grand finale! Did we? No, I do not believe we did! We are in fact reminded that the story goes on! It is not over like some spectacular Independence Day Firework Show. We went through the stories, and every imaginable emotion during Holy Week, to try and experience what really happened so many years ago. Each year we revisit these stories as a way of deepening our own faith, and trying to even fathom or understand what Easter really is all about. All of this did not just happen and then we all of a sudden just move on following the Resurrection with our so-called normal lives. Neither did the apostles back then! We are forever reminded, just like they were, that we are indeed Easter people. As Christians we are also called to remind others that Easter is not over yet. “In the church, the season of Easter lasts for a week of weeks, 7 sets of 7 days, fifty days in total.” (2) What I find even more interesting is that “Each year on the second Sunday of Easter we meet Doubting Thomas.” (1) I mean Thomas is my middle name after all, and I can remember my mother calling me Doubting Thomas several times throughout my life. I am sure that was for good reason as well. Just like Thomas is part of me, I am also here to tell you that “He is all of us, and we doubters are glad to share with all other doubters the peace of the Risen Christ.” (1) So, as every one of us has a little Thomas in us let’s explore how Jesus calls and reminds each and every one us through our Gospel Reading today by saying, “Do not doubt but believe.”

As a child I grew up watching Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood. I am sure many of you have heard of this show, or even heard of him, or maybe you have even watched an episode or two yourselves. What I do find rather shocking though, is that most people do not even realize or remember that Mister Rogers was indeed an Ordained Presbyterian Minister. However, he did not find that conventional way of reaching others through the pulpit as his calling, or his life’s work though. When he actually saw his first television show at his parents’ home he found a spark to do something different. That different approach would reach several children, and adults for that fact, over the course of 33 years of his very public and televised ministry that ran on PBS. Now, you may ask why I am sharing this with you this morning. Well, of course I do have a point after all! As we explore the topic of doubt with one another we get to see how Mister Rogers indeed dealt with it in a head-on manner that most people do not realize either. So, let me share this little story with you. Mister Rogers once got a letter from a blind girl, who wrote that she had heard him say he owned fish, but she worried they weren’t being fed. Well, this indeed was concerning, and it created a sense of doubt in this girl. Instead of just moving along after reading this letter Mister Rogers decided to take action. So, at the end of every following show, he’d narrate, “I’m feeding the fish,” just for her. We see right here that doubt and concern were both vanquished in such a simple, caring, and thoughtful way. Thank God Mister Rogers wanted to provide reassurance to this blind girl who wrote him this letter. Mister Rogers acted just like Jesus and he continued feeding and caring for those fish, and for people in that very fact, just like our God does for each and every one of us each and every day!

Now, as I moved along in my reading and research I came across another story that I found particularly interesting, but also rather shocking. Now, as I share it with you I am going to pick my head up here and there and see if I see the same reaction on your faces, or use my ears and try to listen and see if I hear you all gasp a bit just like I did when I was reading this.

““The Easter story is nothing but a myth,” Tom’s high school teacher announced to his class a few days before Easter break. “Jesus not only didn’t rise from the grave,” he continued, “but there’s no God in heaven who would allow his son to be crucified in the first place.”

“Sir, I believe in God,” Tom protested. “And I believe in the resurrection.”

“Tom, you can believe what you wish to, of course,” the teacher said, “However, the real world excludes the possibility of miracles like the resurrection. The resurrection is a scientific impossibility. No one who believes in miracles can also respect science.”

Then the teacher proposed an experiment. Reaching into his refrigerator, he produced a raw egg and held it up. “I’m going to drop this egg on the floor,” he said. “Gravity will pull it toward the floor that the egg will most certainly break apart.” Looking at Tom with a challenge, he said, “Now Tom, I want you to pray a prayer right now and ask your God to keep this egg from breaking when it hits the floor. If he can do that, then you’ll have proven your point, and I’ll have to admit that there is a God.”

After pondering the challenge for a moment, Tom slowly stood up to pray: “Dear Heavenly Father,” Tom prayed, “I pray that when my teacher drops the egg, it will break into a hundred pieces. And also, Lord, I pray that when the egg does break, my teacher will have a heart attack and die. Amen.”

After a unison gasp, the class sat in silent expectation. For a moment the teacher did nothing. At last he looked at Tom and then the egg. Without a word he carefully put the egg back into the refrigerator. “Class dismissed,” the teacher said, and then he sat down to clear his desk.

The teacher apparently did believe in God’s existence more than he thought. Many people, like that teacher, deny that God exists, yet run from him, question him, and attack him whenever they get the chance. That teacher wasn’t willing to bet his life that God didn’t exist.” (3)

Pretty shocking story there right? Now, was it just the overall story that you found shocking? Was it the teacher’s words and disbelief that you found shocking? Was it the prayer that Tom prayed, and for that fact how he actually ended it that you found shocking? How about the way the teacher reacted following the prayer as being the most shocking part of the story? Regardless there were indeed several various elements of this story that were indeed nonetheless shocking to all of us I am sure.

One thing that does not shock me is that Jesus often taught in short stories, or parables, so each one of us could put some perspective on things. He knew our small attention spans, and he wanted to ensure that we caught the gist or the point of what he was talking and teaching about. Sometimes I need to remind myself of that very point and perspective when I prepare my sermons, and even when I am up here delivering and sharing them with you. So, as I move on and try and sum things up today, let’s see if I can do so in a manner that I do not lose you before our final Amen.

Now, where in the heck was Thomas?!?! Why when all of his family, his brothers and sisters, were sitting scared and locked away from anyone that might harm them, was he not there? Why was Thomas out in the wilderness gallivanting around all by himself? Could he not stand to cry and sulk while grieving around everyone else? Could he not be supportive of everyone else? Well, whatever Thomas’ mood or thought process was he actually missed out on a pretty important and life-changing experience. When he finally decided to return to the room and the group we learn that “In his misery and loneliness, he feels rejected. He feels like an outsider, and so he remarks angrily, "So, so you’ve seen the Lord, so what? I’ll believe that when I see him myself, when I stick my finger into the scars in his hand, and thrust my hand into his side, then I’ll believe and not before." Can you sense his utter despair, his hopeless anger? And then he had to endure a week of waiting wondering if Jesus will return to the group again.” (4)

Now, I am sure we have all questioned to ourselves at one time or another “Why does Thomas refuse to believe? Because Thomas was a practical person, and he lived in a practical world. He was shattered on Good Friday when Jesus died. But he wasn’t about to succumb to fantasy. Dead was dead, and that was it. No one in their right minds would doubt it when the Romans said a prisoner was dead. They were experts at killing! It’s not that Thomas didn’t want to believe that Jesus was still alive. But Thomas knew how the world worked. Dead was dead, and that was it.” (3)

Thank goodness Jesus decided to return to vanquish Thomas’ doubt! Thank goodness Thomas got that real-life experience he needed to believe, and be able to carry out his life’s work. Awkwardly enough we also learn later on that Thomas actually died from being pierced in the side by a spear. Now, whether that was for his belief or conviction, or by accident is one thing. However, it is rather interesting that he needed to see and feel Jesus’ side in order to believe, and that indeed becomes the very way he left this life and his earthly ministry as well.

“Today, Jesus comes to you in an invisible way, through his Word. Every time you hear the Word of God, Jesus steps into your life and says, “Peace be with you.” Every time you receive the Lord’s Supper, Jesus is right there, through his body and blood, and he chases away your doubts, and fills you with faith and hope and trust in him. Through the Word, through the Sacraments, that’s how Jesus appears to you and speaks to you, just as he spoke to Thomas.” (3) “Do not doubt but believe.”

Amen.

**References**

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Year A 2023

April 16, 2023

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Scripture: John 20:19-31

Denomination: Lutheran

**John 20:19-31**

The risen Jesus appears to his disciples, offering them a benediction, a commission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But one of their number is missing, and his unbelief prompts another visit from the Lord.

19When 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.” 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So 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.”

 26A 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.” 27Then 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.” 28Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 29Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But 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.