

## **But Thomas...: *John 20:24-31***

Norwalk Christian Church, April 15, 2018, Easter 3, Year B (diverted from lectionary)

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Well, here we are again, the story of Thomas. Almost every year after Easter, a week or two later, this text is preached. Marti and I have preached it 3 or so times for you, and I've struggled this week to find something new to say, and to resist simply repeating an old sermon--because if I can't remember what I said before, will you?

I also thought about skipping this text completely, and picking something else. Something easier. After all, next week, we start a new sermon series called "Making Room for All". That's the theme of our capital campaign.

If you don't know about this, let's delay *this* sermon for a moment to plug our Capital Campaign. For the last three years we've been on this journey, and last Fall our Building planning team presented you with a plan for the renovation of our church. They shared three phases that you approved, and we will be fundraising and taking pledges for phases one and two starting next week.

We're asking you to prayerfully consider giving to this campaign--above and beyond your normal giving, because we need to keep on being generous (maybe a little more generous) so that we can fund our annual budget. But we believe that with gifts and pledges over three years, we can easily fund phases one and two of our building project, which would add an elevator to our church, open up this chancel (so we have room for things like our Chim-Chim-Chimers), improve lighting in this Sanctuary, create a larger narthex, and make handicap- accessible bathrooms.

That's why our campaign is called "Making Room for All"--because that is, literally, what we want to do. We want to make room up here for all the ministry that is already happening--children's programs, bells, hand-chimes, choir, weddings, and so much more. We want to make room for all--young and old--to be able to go downstairs to participate in the ministry that happens there. Right now, if you got bad knees (or new knees), if you're in a wheelchair, or just not very good on stairs, you can't go downstairs. If an physically disabled child wanted to join us in our afterschool JYF or Dinky Disciples program, or in our youth group, we could not accommodate them. We want to make room for all. To make for our whole church to sit down at tables together. To make room in the Narthex, for us to mingle after worship instead of running into each other.

We want to make room for all, because in Jesus' house--all are welcome!

So, that's your plug. Get ready for our capital campaign, starting next week. And I think we'll even have some fun in the process.

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Now, none of that has anything to do with our friend Thomas from our text this Sunday. I just thought I could stall for a bit telling you about...because, I still don't know what to say about Thomas this morning.

It's surprising how little we actually know--for sure--about this guy. After John's mention of him here, he only shows up once more in Scripture, in a list of apostle names in Acts 1. That's it. But he is a popular character in later Christian writings and legends.

And there are a lot of stories out there of what happened to Thomas. The strongest tradition suggests he went all the way to India to spread the Gospel of Christ. There is still, today, a religious group we call "St. Thomas Christians" in India that have roots back to the early centuries of the church, and have their own distinct religious customs and practices, and reverence to Thomas the Apostle.

Also, in the Syrian Church--one of the oldest Christian traditions in the world--and, yes, that Syria, the same one the US bombed a few days ago, there is a long tradition of devotion to Thomas the Apostle.

And far from India and Syria, there is a group of Christians in Paraguay, way down in South America, who claim Thomas the Apostle actually lived among the natives, shared the Gospel, and performed miracles.

Who knows? Maybe Thomas did head on down to India...then maybe catch a boat to South America, thousands of years before the Vikings or Columbus.

It's fun to imagine...but let's be honest, my sharing all of this with you is nothing more than more delay tactics. If I stall for long enough, it will be time for communion!

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Maybe it's time I made a confession--it's really not that I don't have anything fresh to say about Thomas--it's that Thomas makes me uncomfortable. I want to avoid this text. But like these stories of Thomas popping up all over the world, Thomas pops up, year after year, right here after Easter.

Try as we may, Thomas doesn't let us slip quietly by the resurrection, Thomas makes us stop, and dwell here for a moment, to ask some hard questions about Jesus, about resurrection, and about ourselves.

Because I remember on Easter--how we sang with confidence, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today!" There was no doubt--just belief.

But now that the dust has settled, our easter wardrobe filed away, and the calendar has moved on with a Capital Campaign on the horizon, it's easy to move past Easter. Maybe that's why John gives us Thomas.

John writes his gospel later than any of the other gospels. He's the furthest away from the actual, living, historical Jesus. John's church has already been kicked out of the synagogues.

They are figuring out their faith and what it means to be church in a new way. And this story they've been given, one they didn't witness with their own eyes, one they only know because of the accounts of witnesses, will they base their lives on this? Can they build a church--indeed a resurrection revolution--on the testimony of others?

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It's a familiar question for us, as we stand here many more years after John's church, trying to believe when we have not seen. And Thomas makes us uncomfortable.

Because, on one hand, we identify with him. We were not there! We did not see his wounds. We have not seen the risen Christ! To ask us to believe, when we have not seen--this is a tall order. "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." That's what Thomas says. It makes sense. It's what I want to say.

But then, a week later, Thomas gets what he wants, and what we could never be given. The skepticism of Thomas on Easter Sunday is met with an appearance of Jesus. Jesus says to him, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

After receiving that invitation, what does Thomas do...well, what we think he does is just that--that he puts his finger into Jesus' wounds, his hands, his side. But that's not in this story. That part we've added, made up, imagined. Like Thomas on a boat to South America...Maybe it happened. Maybe he did prod the risen Christ as Jesus invites him to do. But for some reason, the gospel never says he actually does it.

What it does say is, seeing (not touching) the wounds--Thomas simply declares, "My Lord and my God!"

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Maybe I am reading too much into this detail in the story. Maybe I'm just avoiding a bigger, better sermon point.

But this year, sitting again with Thomas, now two weeks from Easter, as our country bombs yet another country, as the news is filled with stories of porn stars and investigations, firings, of chemical weapons and nuclear arsenals, of bus crashes, budget cuts, and a young boy who is lost--as we struggle to see good in the world in the midst of all the wounded people, wounded spirits, wounded dreams and ideals--maybe the Gospel is asking us this year, to just look at the wounds. Come and see the wounds.

The wounds of this world--the wounds of Christ for this world. We don't have to touch them to see how painful they are. Our world is wounded. We are wounded.

And maybe--just maybe--seeing the wounds and seeing our wounded world is more than enough for us to believe--to believe that resurrection is possible--that it *must* be possible. Because we need hope.

We need to believe that the wounds will be healed, that hope is rising, and new life will spring from the ground. That in this world, there is room for all, and all are--truly--welcome.

This year, maybe belief is simply another word for *hope*. To believe in resurrection is to hope--with all of our being, that these wounds are not all there is. That resurrection is possible--indeed, it is here.

Amen.