

# On Second Thought

By  
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From the Pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Officer Installation

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.

#### Psalm 118:15-17

<sup>15</sup> There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; <sup>16</sup> the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.” <sup>17</sup> I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord.

John's gospel opens with the grand theological prologue introducing Jesus with the affirmation that God so loves the world. The world means the physical earth, the whole creation and every person who inhabits it. This broadly inclusive message announced at the beginning is also reiterated in a beautiful way at the end. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus asks Thomas exactly one week after Easter, adding: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Like the beginning, the end of the gospel points to the future in a most inclusive way. When the writing of this gospel is long over, John seems to be saying, future disciples will come to believe through God's ongoing revelation and through God's word.

This first Sunday after Easter is often called Low Sunday. Is it because church attendance is predictably lower today compared to the Easter crowd filling the sanctuary to the brim a week ago? Or does "low" mean "low church" after all the "high church" ceremony surrounding Holy Week and Easter Day? Whatever the reason for Low Sunday, this nickname for worship a week after Easter does suggest that there are times in our common life when it's okay to kick back, to disengage high gear, to think about what has happened and where we are headed in light of the resurrection. Low Sunday is a time for reflection, a time for second

thoughts - for second thoughts about where the resurrection might take us.<sup>1</sup>

Our Gospel reading tells the story of the very first Low Sunday. A week after Easter, Jesus appears again to the gathered disciples. But this time, Thomas, who had not yet seen the Risen Lord, finally gets his turn. “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.” We call him Doubting Thomas, but in all the Easter stories there is the undercurrent of skepticism about the whole thing. Last Sunday, on Easter, we heard how the women told the disciples the news of Jesus' resurrection, which they hastily dismissed as an idle tale. Matthew describes Easter suspicion even more bluntly, writing in the last verses of his gospel, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

Thomas wears the Doubting title, but he is not alone in his doubts. We look around and see so much despair and desperation and wonder how God's resurrection power really IS redeeming the world. Sometimes it is hard to see that love is stronger than death, and to believe Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup> James F.Kay, "Second Thoughts about Easter," Seasons of Grace, p. 59 ff.

triumphed over the grave for all time. But take heart. God gives us time for second thoughts. With Thomas the gospel affirms our slow turning toward faith by showing us how the Risen Christ was not totally convincing even to those first witnesses. Many doubted, the scripture tells us, and we belong to a community of faith in which not everyone believes all the time. Faith is a gift that waxes and wanes, and can be experienced in strong ways and barely discernable ways at different points in time.

The role of Thomas in today's scripture is meant to show us that if the resurrection appearances of Jesus himself did not convince all the disciples all at once, then we are meant to accept that our faith may come easy at certain moments, but over a lifetime there will be, perhaps there should be, questions and uncertainty and perplexity. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus asks Thomas. And in this gentle rebuke, Jesus suggests what the Gospel of John emphasizes throughout. Namely, that Jesus comes to us as God's Word. Low Sunday invites us to think again about how we hear God's word and what difference it makes.

This year, by happy coincidence we chose this Sunday after Easter to ordain and install church officers. At the very heart of our Presbyterian tradition is the belief that God calls each of us, every one of us, to live a full and committed life following the Risen Christ. One of the distinctive

characteristics of our denomination is the notion that each of us has a God-given vocation, that God needs committed school teachers and social workers, lawyers, physicians and parents who stay home with children. God needs preachers, plumbers and bankers, artists and architects and accountants. We Presbyterians cling to the belief that God calls each of us to a vocation of following Christ in whatever we are doing with our lives. And so when we take time in worship to gather around our fellow church members to lay hands on their heads and shoulders, we are saying that the hand of God rests on each and every one of us, that Jesus Christ says to us, what he said to those fearful disciples after Easter, “Peace be with you” and “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Today we will ordain a handful of new officers for special church service, but the word applies to all of us. Take your God-given vocation and get up and get going. Leave the room where the doors are locked out of fear, where people are worried about the future, anxious about what will become of us. Get up and head to the door and walk out into the bright light of day following the Risen Christ who goes before us. That’s why the Gospel of John makes no distinction between Jesus and Jesus’ word. The word of God brings life, new life. God created the world with a word, and Jesus sends us forward with a word: as I was sent, so I send you.

Do you remember how Maya Angelou recalled her grandmother, whom she called Mamma, who raised her in the little town of Stamps, Arkansas?

“One of my earliest memories of Mamma is a glimpse of a tall cinnamon-colored woman with a deep, soft voice, standing thousands of feet up in the air on nothing visible. That incredible vision was a result of what my imagination would do each time Mamma drew herself up, clasped her hands behind her back, looked up into a distant sky, and said, “I will step out on the word of God.” The depression, which was difficult for everyone, especially for a single black woman in the South tending her crippled son and two grandchildren, caused her to make the statement of faith often. She would look up as if she could will herself into the heavens, and tell her family in particular and the world in general, “I will step out on the word of God. I will step out on the word of God.” “Immediately,” Maya Angelou recalls, “I could see her flung into space, moons at her feet and stars at her head, comets swirling around her.” She went on: “Naturally, since Mamma was over six feet tall, it wasn’t difficult for me to have faith. And because I grew up knowing that the word of God has power.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, today on Low Sunday, the gospel gives us time and space for second thoughts. The news of resurrection is so good, it’s hard to take it

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<sup>2</sup> Maya Angelou, Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now, p. 73-74.

in. Thomas himself had the Risen Christ right in front of him. What we have is the story of Thomas and his word. Today is a day for contemplation - to see in Thomas' doubts some resemblance to our own. But after a bit of reflection, it's time to get on with being sent out on God's word. There is a world to love out there, as God loves it. We have been given the gift of faith by the testimony of the very first witnesses. Each of us has been called to a vocation and to put that word of God into practice, through our work and in service to the church. God's Word still brings us to the Risen Christ. So let us step out on the word of God, and do the good work that is ours to do for the world God so loves.

AMEN