

Doubting Thomas

John 20:19-31

A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter

We are like Thomas. We want visible proof. He said: "Unless I can see for myself and touch his wounds, I will not believe."

Here it is eight days later, and eight days means a week. It means a week after the resurrection. The disciples are together and the Lord appeared to them. When Thomas arrives, they report: "We have seen the Lord!"

But Thomas doubts; he wants to see for himself. There's a name for that. It's called common sense philosophy. If you can see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears, then you can know for sure.

The disciples were not hiding out, and they weren't the only ones to have seen him. Paul writes that one time he appeared to five hundred brethren (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Consider the size of Jerusalem in the First Century. Evidence shows that there were at least 100,000 people in the city at that time. It may have been 500,000, but at least 100,000.

And there was this sensational report that the tomb was empty, and Jesus had been seen. You would think that there would be quite a few people, like Thomas, who would say: "Prove it. If he has risen from the dead, prove it."

But that is not what happened. In the first place, he appeared to a few. When the risen Christ appeared to Thomas and said: "Touch me," what did Thomas do? The text does not say that Thomas touched him (John 20:28).

Instead, Thomas responds with a confession: "My Lord and my God."

(Compare Psalm 35:23 where it says: "My God and my Lord." He could have been quoting the Psalm. The reversal of "God" and "Lord" is incidental.)

It is not an exclamation of surprise like: "Oh, my God!" Rather, this is a confession that says: "You are the Lord." The word "Lord" here means Yahweh or Jehovah.

In the second place, the Doubting Thomas account is like what is said in Acts 10:40-41: "God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

He appeared not to everyone, but only to those who were chosen. We find this offensive. We say: "We have to be able to prove it. God has to show us the proof in a way that makes sense to us." This is how we think. It's our way of reasoning.

But, as Soren Kierkegaard points out, there is an advantage to being a second-generation believer, rather than first generation, like Thomas. If you are first-generation, you may be confused, thinking it has to do with your seeing and hearing, but that is not the case. For first and second-generation Christians alike, it is the Lord's doing.

Back in the 1980's there was a popular TV show hosted by Joseph Campbell, titled, "The Power of Myth." The show presented religions as cultural myths. You have your myth; I have mine. You have your opinion; I have mine. You have your interpretation; I have mine. Truth is whatever you think is truth.

What is truth? Natural science says: "If everything is true, then nothing is true." This was said by the Austrian (atheist) physicist Karl Popper, but it goes back to Aquinas and Aristotle. If you are in science, you laugh at the idea that truth is whatever you want it to be. The same is true in any of the intellectual disciplines.

What then is truth?

We Christians have as our witness some very particular things.

The first Christians were not naïve; they knew about myths of dying and rising gods. But they said: "No, this is not that."

They confessed: In this one who was crucified and resurrected is what it is about.

Revelation 1:8: "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." The hidden power in that verse is the "I am." "I am" is Jehovah, or God.

It goes on a few verses later: "'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades'" (Revelation 1:17-18). And that points to why this is important.

In the common religion of our day, "thinking" is king. We can "think" death is the end, or we can "think" there is no judgment. We can "think" whatever we want when we, like gods, "think" we determine truth.

But "thinking" is not king; death is "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26), and Hades is the first step into Hell. In the Book of Revelation there are two steps to Hell. Christ is king; he has the keys; he has conquered them.

Our text from Acts today has an extended quote from Psalm 16; it says: "The Lord is at my right hand that I may not be shaken . . . For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades."

Christ has the keys. He frees us from Hades by his cross alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, to his glory alone. And by saying that, we say: Being a Christian is this, and not that. It's about him.

In the Nicene Creed, we do the same. It is this and not that: "We believe in one God the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God . . . God from God, light from light, true God from true God." This is what it means to be a Christian and affirm the death and resurrection of Christ.

To come back to what is said in the Book of Acts, 10:40-41. It concludes—and this is important for all second-generation Christians, including us in the 21st Century—as we celebrate the Lord's Supper: "God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

He is the host. He is the one who is doing this, not some functionary like me. He is the host; he has the keys. He will "not abandon your soul to Hades." He is the Lord of Death and Hades, the beginning and the end, and that makes all the difference. Amen