

Sermon 4-27-25

Paul Purdue preaching

In 1990, I led a church group to see the Cincinnati Reds play. As Youth Director, I found myself at the concession stand with a line of teens, when the crowd roared to life. A solo home run put us ahead. Riverfront Stadium had no TV's around the concession stands or a state of the art jumbo-tron, and no one had a cell phone to watch the replay. A few innings later again I stood in line with some teens as the crowd roared for another home run that I did not see. The Red's won two to zero on two solo home runs. I missed both homeruns. The Reds went on to win the world series. After 35 years, grace has worked its magic and I have forgotten which teens had to have some Dippin Dots, but I still remember missing out.

We do not know why Thomas missed out, but Thomas was not in the upper room on Easter Sunday evening with the other disciples. In Luke, two other disciples head home after the Passover Festival. (Luke 24) Did Thomas need to get back to work, help a neighbor, or just need some space after the trauma of Good Friday? How does it feel to miss something beautiful, lovely, or holy?

Thomas was not in the Upper Room when the Risen Christ somehow passed through locked doors, stood among the disciples and said, *"Peace be with you... Peace be with you, as God has sent me, so I send you."* Thomas did not see the wounds beginning to heal on the Risen Lord's hands or see Jesus breath on the disciples and say *"Receive the Holy Spirit."* As Peter told Thomas about that first Easter encounter, did Thomas remember how in our second creation story, God breathed life into the clay that became a human being? Thomas missed Jesus empowering us to forgive sins!

On the Road to Emmaus, Jesus sought the two wandering disciples, we might ask why did the Good Shepherd not look for Thomas on Easter? Why did Jesus appear to Mary, Magdalene, and Joanna but when Peter and John run to the tomb they find nothing? Were the angels off duty? Where, when and how the Risen Lord appears is mysterious. The Bible gives us no formula to make God appear.

*When Thomas was with the disciples again, they shared, "We have seen the Lord."* Thomas seems a bit defensive, or sassy, or maybe just simply plainspoken, but Thomas pushes back a little saying, *"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."*

It is hard to miss out, but Thomas does not give up on his faith and Thomas' church does not give up on Thomas. John reports *"A week later Jesus' disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them."* Perhaps that is a message for our churches. *"Do not judge"*, even when people say "I do not believe". (Matt 7) Do not give up on people. Make a safe place for people to share where they are at. "If we love those who love us", agree with us, do not question us, then our Love is nothing special. (Luke 6)

Jesus had room for Thomas' questions. John's Jesus offers these long monologues loaded down with dense symbolism and allegory. John alone gives us wordy images like "I am the bread of life... I am the light of the world... I am the good shepherd". (John 6,8, 10). In John 14, Jesus offers words we recite at funerals, but are confusing: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places... (and) I am going to prepare a place for you ... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going."* Peter might have wondered if they were going to Jesus' boyhood home in Nazareth or the Temple in Jerusalem (*"My House shall be a house of prayer for all nations"* in Mark 11), but Thomas said to Jesus, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* Thomas not only asks a question, Thomas challenges Jesus: *"we do NOT know the way."* Jesus does not put Thomas down or throw Thomas out of the group. And Thomas keeps on following Jesus despite his questions.

Confirmands, hear the Good News, God welcomes your doubts and your questions. Indeed, Thomas follows Jesus, even in his doubt, disagreement, and difference of opinion. Maybe our churches need to become safe places, judgment free zones, where we can feel safe enough to be deeply honest with ourselves, each other, and God? Maybe, we can have enough faith to sometimes answer "I do not know" and "I do not believe that". Love makes room for our doubts. Love never needs guilt or shame to woo us closer to the truth.

Vast sections of the church in America focus too much on what people believe. Indeed, some seem to teach that belief is all that matters. But I think Jesus may care more about what we do than what we believe. If you read Jesus's Sermon on The Mount you will read about what we are called to do. Jesus says "blessed are the peacemakers" not blessed are you who believe peace is good. Jesus tells us to forgive 77 times, not think about forgiveness. In Matthew 25, Jesus talks about God's final verdict on our lives without mentioning what we believe. *I was hungry and you fed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was an immigrant and you welcomed me in.* Belief can empower us to do good, but believing in a good cause is not the same as actually giving sacrificially. You can believe a lot about Jesus, but following Jesus involves doing the things Jesus does. Thomas sticks with Jesus and the disciples despite his doubts, questions, and disagreements.

We Methodists have always cared about how we live, perhaps more than what we believe. It's in our name, methodist: method, methodology, methodical. In 1739 a small group met together to do three things: 1) to check in on each other's souls, 2) coach each other in Christian living and 3) to give generously. Those are all actions. Wesley believed that when faith *"is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits, therefore it is expected of all who continue"* in these societies *"that they should give evidence"* of their faith by what they do: First, do no harm to anyone. Second, do all the good you can to all people in every way you can. Third, by practising the spiritual disciplines in community.

In her book, The Wounds are the Witness: Black Faith Weaving Memory into Justice and Healing Yolanda Pearce writes *“what we believe and how we practice are not two separate realms. Ritual weds belief (our theology) to the body (what we do).”* And then she asks an increasingly secular people *“If rituals develop from the heart’s great need for connection, community, and meaning, where can we meet those needs if we are disconnected from institutions and congregations? ... If we deconstruct our way out of traditional Christian belief, which can indeed be narrow, and if we disconnect from the church, which is indeed flawed: What then? Where do we connect, and what do we worship? And to whom will we go in the moment of our greatest need? Who will weep with us, and who will rejoice with us?”* Thomas did not give up on a church that betrayed, denied, and abandoned Jesus when the crowd came with soldiers, torches and swords. Thomas stuck with it.

Today, you are taking vows to follow Jesus; to do the things that Jesus did and be part of the church. I made a decision to follow Jesus, in sixth grade. What I believe or understand about God and especially the Bible has changed a lot over the past 40 years. In some seasons, my stack of questions has been bigger than my pile of answers, but I now am pretty sure that living like Jesus matters more than my questions or answers. Last week, we talked about the vows you will take today. They seem to be more about what we do than what we know. .

Will you avoid things that are wicked or do harm?  
Will you use your power for good and never evil?  
When you do something wrong (the theological word being “sin”) will you stop it?  
After you stop doing harm will you do the right thing (the theological word being “repent”)?  
Will you push back against evil, injustice, and oppression?  
Do you believe Jesus is with us as our Christ, Savior, Lord, Model, and Standard?  
Do you trust God's grace (compassion) to guide us?  
Will you love and serve in the manner and method of Jesus Christ?  
Will you nurture one another?  
Will you include all people?  
Will you help build a community of love and forgiveness?  
Will you model your life after Christ's example?  
We will pray, be present, give, serve and model Christlikeness for others?  
When you fall down, will you get up and keep walking towards Christ?

Jesus does not give up on Thomas. God never gives up on any of us. And so a week later, although the doors were shut, and I suppose locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put your finger in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Will you, confirmands and confirmed, come help us build a community of love and forgiveness? Together will our faith be strong enough to welcome the world's questions?

And when we have our own doubts, will we not be afraid to ask? Come let us follow Jesus as we build a safe, healing and Christ-like place where everyone can find a home. Amen.