

April 28, 2019

## **Till I Experience**

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Earlier this week, I was talking with a friend and mentioned that the Gospel for this morning is the story of Jesus' resurrection appearance to the disciples. And he almost immediately said, oh, yes, doubting Thomas. And I said, well, yeah, but not really. And that I always find it interesting and a lot of fun, actually, to preach on this Gospel lesson. And at the time, I hadn't really fully developed a sermon, some may say I never really fully develop a sermon, but I was still working on it. But in reading it this year and looking at it again and then something different came to me about this whole passage and the whole appearance. Isn't it interesting that the risen Lord, God, knows all, aware of everything, comes to the disciples that evening when Thomas isn't there? If he really wanted to speak to all 11 of the remaining disciples, one would think that he would have waited until Thomas got back for this. Right? Doesn't that make sense?

So, Jesus ... let's take the premise that Jesus knew that Thomas wasn't going to be there. And he comes to the ten disciples and he immediately says to them, peace be with you, because he scared them. They were behind locked doors, and he just kind of appears. And so, he says, peace be with you, calm down, it's me. And he immediately shows them his hands and his sides so that they recognize that it is indeed the Jesus that they had walked with for three years, that they had witnessed go through the trial and be crucified. The empty tomb now made sense to them. They were very excited about it. And so, we don't know how long Jesus was there, we only know that before Thomas got back, he had left. So, Thomas comes in. Hi, guys. How's things going? And they say, we've seen the Lord. He is raised from the dead indeed. He came. He has showed us his hands and his side. He is risen indeed. And instead of saying, hallelujah ... that was supposed to be funny. Thomas said, well, I'm sorry. I don't know what you guys experienced. I believe you believe what you saw, but until I see that, until I experience that, I'm not going to be able to believe.

Now, what really made me start thinking after that was, if Jesus knew that Thomas wasn't going to be there and the other ten were, and he said this to the ten and what else did he say? He breathed on them, received the Holy Spirit, okay? So, the ten had received the Holy Spirit. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Okay, so he's now giving them a charge. You're supposed to go out and convince people that this resurrection thing actually took place. That Jesus was indeed the Messiah, that the teachings that he gave during his lifetime are meaningful and powerful and need to be learned, and that he is raised from the dead. So, the promises of this kingdom of God that he has come into the world to share. That's true and you are a part of it if you want to be. It's an invitation, open invitation.

Okay, so, we've got the disciples. They now had the Holy Spirit. They now have a charge. Thomas comes in. They try to fulfill that charge. Nothing. Thomas is not convinced, right? Unless I see his hands, until I see his side, I'm not going to believe it. Now, they had seven days to convince this guy that what they were saying was true. So that he could have the same kind of feeling. That same kind of knowledge of the resurrection. That he could receive that same kind of thing. They had seven days. Nothing. We have no indication that Thomas made any headway as far as believing that the resurrection was true, and that all the promises therefore that Jesus had made during his lifetime were true.

So, a week later, same scenario. Up in the room all together. Thomas is with them this time. Doors are shut, Jesus appears. Peace be with you, because they're still kind of scared. And He goes right up to Thomas. He goes, here. Put your fingers here. Actually here, not here. And put your hand in my side. Don't doubt, but believe. And he does. He's had the experience now. Now, it wasn't the experience of someone telling him about their experience. It was Jesus Himself who appears. My Lord and my God, he responds. Do you believe because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. It's a great story, but when you start looking at it, it's not so much about doubting Thomas, but about ten disciples who have failed to fulfill their charge. Couldn't convince the one disciple who wasn't there, who had walked with Jesus for three years. That this resurrection thing was true. So, they didn't do so good. So let's not give Thomas a bad name, alright?

Now, what would we get out of this? I mean, that's an interesting way of looking at it, and I've really enjoyed playing with that in my mind. But what does it mean for us? I think there are several things. First, we are those disciples. We, in our baptism, have received the Holy Spirit. We have had in our lives at some point an experience with the risen Lord that has led us to be able to say, I believe. To make the promises and vows that we've made in baptism. And the charge that those disciples received is the same charge that we received. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. We have another part of the message. Part of the message is, not only did God create, not only did God covenant with the people of the Hebrews and the Jews, but has sent His son into the world, has come into the world, has lived, has taught, has embraced humanity, has died for the sins of the world and has been raised from the dead. That's our story, and that's the story that we share. Hopefully a little bit better than the disciples did, because they couldn't convince Thomas. But that's our charge. We are called now to share the story, to say that I believe because I have experienced this risen Lord in some way or other in my life that has led me to believe that Jesus died for my sins. That the promise of resurrection is offered to me, and because I have believed and because I've been baptized, then I am part of this kingdom of God. And as a follower and a witness of Jesus Christ, let me share the story.

Now, one of the things that's happened throughout my ministry, I've known so many people who have someone in their life that is just not going in the right direction. A lot of times it's a child. Could be a friend, could be a brother or sister. Someone in their life that they know and care about that just can't quite make that connection of a God who loves them, who joined with humanity, who came into the world so that we could have an example of what the relationship between humanity and God should be like. And once we accept that and come into relationship with that God through God incarnate, then we too are living a life that is better. A life that recognizes God and recognizes that we are called to be peaceful, loving, just merciful, all the things, all the promises that we've made in our baptisms.

And they've known this person and they've tried to share with them their belief and why they believe. They've shared with them many times experiences that they have had. That they have experienced the presence of God, and still this person cannot come to faith. And before I would simply say to them, you are doing what you can do. You are loving them. You are caring for them. You are sharing with them the truth that you know, and you're sharing with them in such a way that you hope that they might come to that truth and then acknowledge that in their own lives. And it hasn't happened. Now, I would say, you're in good company, because the disciples couldn't convince Thomas in seven days. And he had actually seen Jesus and talked to Him and witnessed the miracles. So, one thing, it's not your fault. You're doing what you can do. You're sharing what you can share. You're sharing the truth, the knowledge, the understanding, experience that you have had. It's not always going to convince another person. So, don't feel so badly about that. Don't stop praying. Don't give up that relationship, but understand that it's not about you and it's not up to you. It's up to that person and God, and in God's

good time, there may be that experience where they understand that God is true, that God loves them, and that's out of your hands. Simply give what you can give, do what you can do, share what you can share, trust God to do the rest. That's the first thing that I kind of get out of this that, you know, if the disciples can fail after receiving the Holy Spirit, so can we. We're not guaranteed success when it comes to that.

The other thing is that yes, people have doubts, and we in our journeys will have doubts from time to time. Not doubt in the existence of God per se, although that could be a question that enters our mind every once in a while. But the doubts that I hear more about are, you know, do I believe the right things? Do I believe the right way? Am I living my life in a way that God approves of to the point that I will be allowed to participate in the fullness of God's kingdom? And as we go through our life, and certainly some of us have very long journeys. We started as infants, into adulthood, into old age, and we have the experiences from time to time of the risen Lord coming into our lives. And sometimes when we get stuck, sometimes when we have those doubts, then is the time to have our eyes open. Then is the time to be watchful for that experience where the risen Lord comes to us. Not quite as dramatically as He did to the disciples in the upper room, as a rule. Although I've known a few who have had that kind of experience, but more in the words of a caring soul. More in the presence of someone when you feel like you're about to let go of the end of the rope. Where you just don't know or understand where the next step is, and you begin to questioning yourself. You begin to question God and God's love, and it's at those points so often that the risen Lord manifests Himself, appears, and says to us something that is comforting.

Now, it may look like your neighbor or your friend from across the country, but the voice is the voice of God. The voice is the one that has brought you along all this way and knows that you are in this struggle. Knows that you are questioning. Knows that you need something to help you take that next step on the journey. To go one more, to get deeper into that relationship. To have that understanding and that promise is true. And then for a while the road is easier. Then for a while it's okay, I get it again. I'm back there where I have been before, and I know that God's love is true and I know that God's promise is true and that God cares for me and that God is forgiving.

You know, I was having a conversation with someone just the other day, and their question was, do I believe right? Do I believe the right things about God? Do I believe the right things about how to live my life as a Christian, that God is going to embrace me and to allow me into that place of God's kingdom? I'm not sure, I don't know. And then, it's not really a reasonable thing. You can't just reason with him. All you can say is, God loves you. That's why Jesus came into the world. That God embraces you in that way with Jesus' arms. And if you don't believe exactly the way some orthodox Christian says we have to believe about the trinity, then I don't think that is going to hurt you any. You know, I don't believe that God is waiting for us to leave this world and give us a quiz and a test. So, what do you believe about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Explain to me the trinity.

Most of us are not going to pass that very easily. It's about trusting God's love. It's about trusting that all that Jesus did was not in vain. It's about believing that even in our brokenness, how limited we are when it comes ... if we try to compare ourselves with God, or even compare ourselves to other Christians. It's not about that. I think that the only question that will be asked is the same question that Peter was asked on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Do you love me? Did you love me? Have you tried to love me and the people around you? Have you reached out? Have you sought my guidance? Have you tried to live your life in peace and justice and mercy with the people around you? And if you can say, I've tried, I haven't always succeeded. I've tried. Then I believe the voice of God is going to say, enter right in. I've

loved you from the beginning. I love you now. I will love you always. That's what we need to share with one another. That's the experience. That's the story that will help people to take that next step. To remind them how much they are loved by God. And to try to love them as much as we can.