

“Doubters All”

So what is Thomas' nickname? “Doubting” Thomas!

And what do you think? Is that a fair nickname?

How many think it's fair? And why do you think that?

How many think it's unfair? And why do you think that?

Well I'm going to be a good Lutheran and suggest that it's “both/and”!

I think that is fair because he did have his doubts, as does everyone.

But I think that it is unfair because again, everyone has doubts.

If we're going to call him a doubter because he didn't believe someone's testimony,

then we could call ALL of the male disciples doubters

because they didn't believe Mary's or the other women's testimonies!

And in this case, Thomas was not asking for anything that the other disciples hadn't already been given.

When Jesus appeared to the 10 disciples that first Easter evening, he showed them the scars on his hands & feet.

And so Thomas is merely asking for the same experience.

For me, that's the first important message in this story.

It's important that EVERY person encounter and experience the risen Christ for themselves.

That's what Mary did. (Mark 16.9)

That's what the other women at the tomb did. (Matthew 28.9-10)

That's what the 2 disciples on their way to Emmaus did. (Luke 24.13-32)

That's what the 10 disciples did. (Luke 24.36-43 and John 20.19-25)

That's what Thomas did. (Mark 16.14 and John 20.26-31)

Jesus appeared to each & every one of his 11 remaining disciples – & to the important women in his life, too,

He did not expect any of them to believe without seeing and hearing, without experiencing,

without a personal encounter.

So there absolutely no reason to single Thomas out or judge him.

So why does the author of John hold up those who have not “seen”?

Well, remember that John was written at a time when there were few eye-witnesses to the resurrection left,

and there was a concern that people who hadn't seen the risen Christ in his physical body,

might have more difficulty believing.

But God already had a plan to address that challenge.

Remember that crucifixion and resurrection were only 2/3rds of God's plan

and there still needed to be ascension, so it was never the plan for Jesus to remain physically on this earth.

That meant that God needed to establish another way for people to encounter & experience the risen Christ –

which is why Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit!”

So the first important message in this text

is that everyone needs to have an impersonal encounter and experience with Jesus.

And the second important message is that the only way that this can happen is through receiving the Holy Spirit.

Let me remind you of a few things I preached about recently.

1st, receiving the Holy Spirit is not the same as being baptized.

In scripture these are always talked about as being two different things.

Sometimes people are baptized first and then receive the Holy Spirit;

at other times people receive the Holy Spirit first and are later baptized.

And 2nd, receiving of the Holy Spirit is a transformative experience that can only be experienced later on in life.

It's simply not possible for an infant to have a life-changing transformation.

So again, the first point is that everyone needs to have a personal encounter with Jesus.
And the second is that this can happen only through receiving the Holy Spirit.
Which leads me to the third important thing part of this text that has to do with what the Spirit actually is and does.

Who remembers what the Hebrew word is for “spirit”? **“Ruach”** And the Greek word? **“Pneuma”**
And in addition to “spirit”, what else do “ruach” and “pneuma” mean? **Breath and wind.**
Where’s the first place we hear about the Spirit in scripture? **In the very first lines....**

*“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep,
and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” [Genesis 1.1-2]*

It was God’s Spirit, or breath, or wind, that was the animating force that began creation –
creation that continued as God’s voice, empowered by God’s breath, spoke creation into being.
For 6 days God spoke creation into being and on the 7th day God rested.

What does the number 7 symbolize? **Completion.**

And so what do you think that 7 + 1 or the number 8 symbolizes?

The number above completion, the start of a new creation, the beginning of a new order, the number of the resurrection.

So let me point out that the day of Jesus’ resurrection,

the day he appeared to Mary and to the 10 disciples and breathed on them the Holy Spirit,
was the 8th day after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

In other words God’s wind, God’s breath, God’s Spirit began creating on that 1st day,

and on this 8th day after Jesus was hailed and welcomed as king,

the resurrected Jesus breathes into his disciples his Spirit

and with his breath speaks words that will begin a new creation, a resurrected life in them.

And just for fun, anyone want to guess

how many resurrection appearances of Jesus are recorded in scripture? **That’s right - 8!**

The five I mentioned above – to Mary, to the other women, to the disciples on the road to Emmaus,

to the 10 disciples that 1st Easter evening, and to Thomas a week later –

and then three more –

to 7 disciples on the beach (John 21),

to the 11 on a mountain when he gives the great commission (Matthew 28.16-20),

and to 500 prior to Pentecost (Luke 22.44–49 and Acts 1.3–8).

The Spirit is the breath of God which breathes and speaks new life

into those who want to encounter Jesus and then blows them out into the world.

And it really is NEW life, for every disciple is transformed in an amazing way.

There’s Mary, who—while she continues to love Jesus with a deep & fervent & passionate love—

finds that she can no longer hang on to her private relationship with Jesus

but is compelled to run and tell everyone she knows about him.

There’s Peter, who – while he continues to delight in his deep friendship with Jesus –

finds that the doubt and fear that had made him sink beneath the waves,

try to protect Jesus from himself, and deny Jesus 3 times has gone,

and in place of the fear there’s a new confidence and boldness!

There’s Thomas, who – while he had thought he needed more than the other disciples –

finds he just needed what they had all needed – to experience the Risen Christ.

There’s Paul, who – while he remains a zealous defender of his faith –

finds he no longer hates Christ but loves him like no other.

There are qualities that God gave you when God first created you

that God always meant to be used as you carry out the purpose for which God made you.

But if you are living only out of that 1st creation,

you are missing out on that whole new resurrected abundant LIFE Jesus came to give.

What the story of Thomas tells us, is that each & every one of us needs to have a personal encounter with Jesus.

That happens when we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

And when that happens, our lives will be transformed and we will literally be a new creation, living a resurrected life.

I don't know how to explain it exactly, but I believe that God, in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit
has been present in my life from the time I took my first breath.
The Holy Spirit has led me my entire life, rerouting me every time I've gotten lost,
and has guided me through a winding path towards ministry.
The Holy Spirit has enabled me to hear God's voice – sometimes directly and sometimes through other people.
The Holy Spirit has worked God's healing power in me.
The Holy Spirit even enabled me to see the risen Christ.
So on the one hand, the Holy Spirit has always been in my life.

But on the other hand, there was a moment when Jesus breathed the Spirit into me
and now the Spirit isn't just beside me or in front of me or behind me or above me or below me. The Spirit moved in
and transformed my heart and my life from the inside out.
The Spirit broke up the dry hardened soil of my heart and dug holes
and put in plants of peace and patience, love and joy, faithfulness, and more.
The Spirit waters and nourishes those plants every time
I worship or pray or read God's Word or witness or serve or work for justice.
Are those plants fully grown? No way!
There are times when I need Jesus to show up and prove to me all over again that he's still alive and that he still loves me.
I'm sure we all experience those times of doubt.
Those are the times when we are in that time of waiting – like the week Thomas waited.
But there are also times when I can feel the faith & love & joy & peace & patience growing & I can see & taste their fruit.
There are all the times when Jesus shows up.

Whatever place you find yourself in –
whether it's a place of faith or fear, a place of peace or stress, a place of hope or despair –
know that Christ is risen and some of us have seen the Lord!
Many of us have seen him over & over & over again – and still we can't wait to see him again.
And Jesus wants to meet you and me over and over and over again, too.
Jesus longs to encounter you, to have a personal, intimate experience with you again and again and again.
Jesus longs to breathe his Spirit into you so you'll know a peace that will be his calm presence in the midst of every storm.
And Jesus longs to transform your old life into a new life, a resurrected life,
a Spirit-filled and Spirit-directed life, that leads you into deeper relationship with God.

Thomas longed to encounter, to experience the risen Jesus – to see him, to hear him, to touch him.
And so Thomas came to be with those who also longed for Jesus.
And Jesus showed up and gave Thomas all that he needed.
Jesus gave to Thomas & all his disciples the Holy Spirit, and that Spirit transformed their lives,

Long to encounter, to experience the risen Jesus – to see him, to hear him, to touch him.
Come on Sundays and gather in person for worship.
Come on Wednesdays and gather on zoom for prayer and Bible study.
Come Monday through Friday and gather on the phone for prayer.
As we gather together to seek him, Jesus will appear, and he will breathe into us both his peace and his power.
The peace is what transforms us.
The power is what works in us to transform the church and the world.

In the end, this story of Thomas' encounter with Jesus, of Jesus showing up as the community gathered,
and of his sending them out to be his witnesses, mirrors our mission statement.

Our mission is to help people encounter God, build relationships, and change the world.
But each part of the mission flows from the part before.
And so this day, we thank Thomas and all the disciples for modeling what we are to do.
Long to encounter Jesus and to receive the Holy Spirit,
because when we have received the Spirit, our congregation will have peace in our hearts
and the power to change the world.
Thanks be to God for all God has done, is doing, and will do, for us, in us, and through us! Amen