

April 23, 2017
Easter 2

John 20:19-31: On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe^[b] that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Dear friends of our risen Savior:

Where in the Bible do you find examples of how Satan attacks God's people? I think of the story of Job, and how Satan used personal tragedy to attack Job's faith. There's the story of Samson, a man of God so strong in many ways, yet weak when his love for an ungodly woman overshadowed his love for God. And looking back at the season of Lent, we see how Satan used greed to convince Judas to betray his Savior and cowardice to drive the disciples out of Gethsemane and away from Jesus at a full sprint.

I'm not sure that our text for this morning-- the account of Jesus' two appearances to his disciples in a locked room on consecutive Sundays--would make the cut. And yet it is in this gospel lesson for the first Sunday after Easter that we see Satan playing one of his favorite cards from his hand: he lays down the card of doubt, a card that he continues to play to his day.

Our theme this morning is

Easter destroys doubt.

- 1. Satan deals in doubt**
- 2. Jesus' resurrection defeats doubt**

1. Satan deals in doubt. We can learn a lot about Satan in the days that followed his worst defeat. If somebody asked us what name we associate with the words "Easter" and "doubt", many of us would have the same answer: "Thomas." After Jesus appeared to his disciples on that first Easter evening, we're told in our text: ²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." In spite of the number of witnesses who saw Jesus on that first Easter, in spite of their insistence that Jesus was truly alive, Thomas demanded first hand proof before he'd believe. And so from that very first Easter Thomas has been forever labeled "Doubting Thomas."

As with many stereotypes, this label is rather unfair. The list of doubters found in the pages of scripture is lengthy. Doubt wasn't a weapon that Satan used for the first time on Easter Sunday. Doubt has been an integral part of the devil's arsenal since the Garden of Eden. "Did God **really** say that you must not eat of any tree in the garden?" And Satan has been planting seeds of doubt in the minds of God's people ever since. God promised Abraham that he'd be the father of many nations, yet Satan managed to get Abraham and Sarah to doubt that promise, and so Abraham slept with Hagar. God promised the Israelites he would deliver them to the Promised Land, yet time after time they doubted that God knew what he was doing. Jesus told Peter to get out of the boat and walk on water, but Peter's faith wavered and he began to sink.

In fact, while Thomas has earned the moniker "Doubting Thomas," he wasn't the only disciple on that first Easter who had doubts. In Luke 24 we have a parallel description of that Sunday evening appearance. By this time the disciples had heard the report from the women at the empty tomb about the angels' message, had heard from Mary Magdalene how Jesus had appeared to her, and had heard from the two Emmaus disciples how they had walked with Jesus, and had heard the same thing from Peter. Yet in spite of all of this

proof, what is their reaction when Jesus appears in the locked room? **“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?’”**

It’s Jesus himself standing in front of them, the same Jesus who over and over had told his disciples he would die, but that he would also rise...and yet they doubted. So then it’s not so surprising when on Easter Sunday Thomas struggles to grasp what everyone else finally believes...that his Savior is alive and well, and he issues his “unless” ultimatum. And by doing so, Thomas walks out on to some very thin spiritual ice. Not only does he refuse to accept the testimony of others, but he refuses to connect what has happened with Jesus’ clear and certain promises.

Of course, just when we’re tempted to wonder “How could they?” we look in the mirror and come face to face with our own long list of sinful doubts. I’ve never sat in church on Easter Sunday and said to myself, “I wonder if my Redeemer lives.” I’ve never answered a pastor’s Easter greeting: “Christ is risen” with “Prove it.” But here’s what I have done...I’ve been told **“this will work out for your good,”** and I’ve doubted it. I’ve heard **“God will provide for all of your needs,”** and I’ve said, “But what about...” I’ve listened to Jesus’ promise **“Ask and it will be given to you”** and I’ve thought, “But I have asked, and I’m still waiting.” And perhaps the worst doubt of all: **“I know that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin,”** and yet I wonder about THAT sin. And then I realize that the arrow of doubt that Satan pulled out of his quiver in the Garden of Eden, the arrow of doubt he used on Easter morning on the disciples is the same arrow he so often uses against me.

And what is Satan’s goal? It isn’t just to plant seeds of doubt in God’s **ability** to help me in a difficult situation, or more likely, to doubt God’s **desire** or **willingness** to help me. Satan’s ultimate goal is always the same...to not just get me to walk out on that thin ice of speculation, cynicism and second-guessing, but for my faith to crash through and drown in a refusal to believe God loves me.

And so what’s next? I wonder if too often this is our takeaway from this story in John. The disciples doubted, Thomas doubted, we doubted, shame on all of us. But when we look at this text, we realize that’s not the main point. The message of Easter isn’t that it exposes out doubt, it’s that Jesus’ resurrection defeats doubt.

2. When Satan used his favorite tactic to attack the disciples in the days after Jesus’ resurrection, Jesus didn’t pull out some never-seen-before secret weapon. He responded the way he always does. **On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”** ²⁰ Jesus spoke directly to their doubts and fears: **“Peace be with you.”** Such a common Jewish greeting, but more than just empty words when it’s spoken by the one who delivered true peace between God and man 40 some hours earlier on Good Friday, and when it’s the same words Jesus had spoken just days before in the upper room on Maundy Thursday: **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14).**

And then, as is so often the case with Jesus, he doesn’t just simply speak words of comfort, although his words should always suffice. He also connects his words to something tangible. In the parallel account in Luke we’re told that after he said “Peace be with you,” **[the disciples] were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.** According to the prevalent superstition of the day, the spirits of the dead roamed the earth after death. ³⁸ **He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?”** ³⁹ **Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”** ⁴⁰ **When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.**

And then he walks Thomas through that same process: ²⁶ **A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”** ²⁷ **Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”** ²⁸ **Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”**

On that first Easter Sunday Jesus gave the disciples the evidence they needed. And a week later he did the same for Thomas. That was really nothing new. Throughout his ministry, time after time, Jesus had given them concrete confirmation of who he was: at a wedding in Cana, on a fishing boat that he sent out at the wrong time of the day to the wrong part of the lake, on the side of a hill where there wasn’t enough food, and then there was more than they needed, from a funeral procession outside of a little town of Nain to a grave in Bethany. Evidence in their lives when he rescued them from a life-threatening storm, evidence in the lives of those they loved when he healed Peter’s mother-in-law, evidence in the lives of those around them when he gave sight to the blind and allowed the deaf to hear.

And then perhaps the most convincing evidence of all: in the space of about 72 hours he gave them his very body and blood in an upper room on Thursday in Jerusalem, so they could be reassured of his forgiveness; poured out that blood from a bruised and pierced body on Friday afternoon to pay for their forgiveness; and then an empty tomb on the most joy-filled morning in the history of mankind to ink an exclamation point on their confidence that because he lives, they too shall live.

We are now 2000 years removed from that first bright Easter morning. And for every journey to the cross that you have made, you have also made a corresponding trip to the empty tomb every Easter. If you're like me, it's seldom on Easter morning that your doubts assail you. When do you find yourself in your own locked room? It's weeks or months later during sleepless nights that your confidence can be overwhelmed by the uncertainty of the unknown.

But what is the evidence that Jesus gives us? He's never appeared in front of me in bodily form in a locked room. He's never asked me to touch his hands or side. But what he has done, over and over...week after week, is come to me here in his house and speak to me from this lectern and pulpit. What he has done, over and over, day after day, is come to me through the pages of his Word. What he has done is given me comfort and encouragement from some passage I had long ago memorized and seemingly long since forgotten, until the exact moment he knew I needed to recall it. What he has done is given me exactly the message I needed in a "Your Time of Grace" message on Facebook or a chapel devotion from a brother at FVL. And in every case he gives me exactly the validation I shouldn't need but that I still crave.

Did you ever wonder why that first Easter unfolded the way it did? Why didn't Jesus streamline that whole process? Why keep the disciples in suspense? Since it's God who wrote that script, then why not have those women round up all 11 disciples on their way to the tomb and then when they all arrive, Jesus himself stands by the empty grave and says, "I am risen!" and they could have all said, "You are risen indeed!" Why the angels' report to the women, and Jesus' appearance to just Mary Magdalene and then Peter?

What did the disciples learn on that first Easter? That their confidence could be grounded not in logical evidence they saw with their own eyes, but rather what they heard through their ears of faith. Jesus knew that in 40 short days there would no more miraculous appearances in locked rooms. No longer would they be able to touch his side or cling to his hands. What they would have...all they would have...is his Word and his Sacrament. And so he was teaching them that having that Word and those Sacraments, they would now have everything they needed. That was his message to them in that locked room. And it is his message to us today: **"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** By God's grace and his grace alone, you and I believe. Satan, you and your doubts, be gone. We **know** that our Redeemer lives!

Pastor David Wenzel