

Rev. Dr. Jim Gill

April 28, 2019

“Second Chance-”

Psalms 118:14-29 John 20:19-31 Acts 5:27-32

Welcome to Holy Humor Sunday.

This first Sunday after Easter is Holy Humor Sunday. If you are not familiar with that concept, it is only because we are not in the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity. It is based on the understanding that the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate joke on death, Satan, and all the forces of evil. It is a testament to the God who, as the psalmist says, "sits in the heavens and laughs" (2:4) at the foolishness of humanity and any forces that might seek to thwart divine purposes. Word has it that one tradition is for priests to gather on the Monday following Easter for cigars, brandy, and jokes to celebrate the God who does this surprising, transforming thing.

The resurrection is comedy of the best sort, the unexpected reversal of expectations. Mary comes to the tomb on Easter morning expecting to find a dead body. Her train of thought keeps barreling along one track, and she almost literally stumbles over the risen Lord, asking, "Can you tell me where you have laid you? "

Resurrection reverses the expectation of gloom and doom in the face of death and instead brings celebration. Alleluia!

In light of this being Holy Humor Sunday I'd like to begin my sermon with a song that I shared on the email we sent out to the church on Maundy Thursday. It's called "the Last Laugh".

1. He was a man of sorrows, but he had a sense of humor too,
like when he healed a blind man by sayin', "Here's mud in your eye!"
and when he called the Pharisees, a bunch of blind guides.

1. Then there were the camel jokes he told his disciples
like the one bout the camel going through the eye of the needle
and the camel that crawled in the goblet
while the gnats were being strained,
and the Pharisee chugged the camel down without a complaint.
(would you like one hump or two with that sir?)

2. What about walking on the water?
Changin' water into wine?
healing on the sabbath
castin' demons into swine
and how with one kid's Happy Meal 5,000 folks were fed
how can we miss the humor in the things he did and said?

3. But the greatest one he ever pulled was just when all looked lost

things looked so hopeless as he hung upon the cross.
 But the last laugh was heard around the world
 after his weekend stay
 and the final knockout punch line hit..
 when the stone was rolled away.

Frederick Buechner in his book: Wishful Thinking writes: "Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving." 1

You may be interested to know that in Matthew, Mark and Luke, we are told absolutely nothing at all about Thomas. It is only in John's Gospel that he emerges as a distinct personality, but even then there are only 155 words about him.... but there is more than one description.

When Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem the disciples thought that it would be certain death for all of them. Surprisingly, it was Thomas who said, "Then let us go so that we may die with him." It was a courageous statement, yet we don't remember him for that. We don't call him "Courageous Thomas"

In the Upper Room when Jesus is preparing his disciples for his leaving them Thomas said, "Lord we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?" To which Jesus responded, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." We have that statement because Thomas asked for directions. But we don't call him "Inquiring Thomas."

The next Sunday night the disciples were together again; this time Thomas was with them. Again, the doors were locked; but suddenly, Jesus stood among them. Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger into my hands. Put your hand into my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe" Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

In this story we have the one place in the all the Gospels where the Divinity of Christ is bluntly and unequivocally stated. Look at his confession, "My Lord, and my God." Yet we don't call him, "Professing Thomas."

Perhaps Thomas' real problem was that he was devastated by what had happened and would not admit it. Not to his friends, not even to himself. He was so devastated that he could not see what had to be the sheer joy on his friends' faces. After all, what they experienced in meeting the resurrected Jesus totally changed them. It was their encounter with the risen Lord that empowered them to publicly and powerfully proclaim the good news, the news that, over time would turn the world upside down. But Thomas could not see that joy.

No doubt there are folks in our world in exactly the same boat. Life has dealt some crushing blows — marriages break, homes split, jobs are dissolved,

addictions overpower, diseases devastate, grief grows into despair. They find it hard to believe.

We live in a land where, "Ya gotta see it to believe it." (unless it's April 1st). One of our 50 states of our United States-Missouri is called the "Show Me State." There's even a Bible of the unbelievable--Ripley's Believe it or not!

However, there are so many things that used to be impossible that we now take for granted. Can you believe that people used to live without electricity or indoor plumbing? In fact, did you know that people actually used to live in Texas in the summer without Air Conditioning! I grew up in Houston without air conditioning. We had an attic fan. I would lay on my bed at night with the window open the screen down and have the Attic Fan suck the humidity over my body.

For years the goal was to find someone to break the 4 minute mile. President Kennedy made a commitment to put a man on the moon. We've since made a watch no gears, a personal computer smaller than a living room.

Thomas had not seen the risen Lord like the others had. They told Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas was unconvinced. His friends must have been either deluded or delusional. Their story was simply too good to be true.

Thomas was a realist. He had been hurt and disappointed. He had expected so much from Jesus. To watch Jesus die on the cross like a common thief was too much for Thomas to bear. He had his hopes dashed once. Now he wanted to be careful because he didn't want to set himself up for another letdown.

We have to admire Thomas for being so honest with his doubts. Even though it was a fact that was attested by 10 of his closest friends, he could not believe it. On the night that Jesus rose from the dead, Thomas missed his chance to see it for himself. He said 'I won't believe unless I see it.' Or "Seeing is believing." Actually, Seeing is "verifying."

When Jesus did make his command performance for Thomas a week later Jesus chided Thomas and in response said "Believing is Seeing." Thomas you believe because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

We're in the same situation that Thomas was before Jesus appeared to him. We have not seen Jesus. We have to take Thomas' word for it. We have to take the word of all the disciples, their friends and the people they shared their story with. We have to take the word of those who wrote down what they saw and heard. We are among the "blessed ones" who have not seen and YET ...believe! We have to believe to see it.

There is a story about a pre-civil rights African American community in Florida. The story says that during times of political elections, this community would rent a voting machine and go through the voting process. Now, they knew that their

votes would not be counted, but they voted anyway. When asked by members of the white community why they did this every year, they replied, "Oh, just practicing. Just practicing." Believing in what is not yet seen means we practice or behave as if it is already exists.

At St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Houston where I served as an Associate Pastor from 1981 to 1991 there is a staircase that has this inscription. "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." This is what leaders and visionaries do. They believe in something bigger than themselves and they begin to act as if it is so. I don't know if the person who painted the quote on the wall at the bottom of the staircase at St. Andrew's didn't know who said it and that's why it was left out but when I went to Washington D.C. with Anne last year I saw the quote again. It was on a Wall of quotes at the memorial honoring Martin Luther King Jr. 2

I want to tell you about another Thomas. He didn't see it so he didn't believe. He was a brilliant man. He accomplished unbelievable things and contributed greatly to the founding of our country. But when it came to matters of faith, he was a doubting Thomas. I have in my hand a copy of The Jefferson Bible. The subtitle is "The Life and Morals of Jesus Christ of Nazareth--extracted from the gospels by Thomas Jefferson."

He could not tolerate those passages which dealt with the supernatural. In the Thomas Jefferson Bible you will find only the moral teachings and historical events of Jesus' life. He took out the miracles. No virgin birth. Here is how his bible ends: "There laid they Jesus and rolled a great stone at the mouth of the sepulcher and departed." The very next page says, A biographical sketch of Thomas Jefferson.

I think he could have started his own denomination called the Cafeterians—take what you like and leave what you don't. It is very easy to rewrite history and say, "that did not happen." But the story remains that the disciples were witnesses to these events. Thomas Jefferson is in essence calling the disciples liars and that they continued throughout the first century, for 70 years to propagate those lies.³

When it comes to Thomases, I think I prefer to go with the Thomas who saw and believed and said, "My Lord and My GOD!" than the one who didn't see and left Jesus in the tomb, and on the next page told the story of HIS own life! Thomas Jefferson took a selfie before cameras were invented!

Throughout the years since Jesus' coming, miracles have continued to happen. Healings still happen--physical healings, spiritual healings, emotional healings. The lump is no longer there. The old rebellious spirit is no longer there. The anger and hurt are no longer there.

God works within the chemistry of our body. God works through the prayers of our spirits. God works within the longings of our heart.

The important message of our Scripture lesson is that Jesus praised faith in people who believed in the absence of signs and wonders. Jesus says to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Christian faith does not depend on signs and miracles! Christian faith is an ongoing relationship with the living Christ that perseveres even when God seems to be silent.

Do I believe in miracles? Yes. By definition, miracles defy explanation. Miracles point us to God who defies explanation and requires faith to accept, to believe, the unbelievable.

The message of the gospel to those who cannot see the Easter joy is, "Open your eyes!" See what God has done. Celebrate it. Even laugh about it.

That is a reminder we all need from time to time. Life can be so burdensome; we can be depressed, discouraged, and despondent. Then along comes a day like this one. A day for laughter and light-heartedness, for comedy and craziness, a day to celebrate the victory of the resurrection over death and the grave, a day to join our voices with the God who "sits in the heavens and laughs," a day to remember the word of Jesus who said, "I am come that [you] might have life and that [you] might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10 KJV). 1

Unlike doubting Thomas Jefferson, Believing John ends HIS book with these verses 30-31, "Now Jesus did many other things in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

We've all heard, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try, again. But in the case of Thomas it's more like, "If at first you don't believe, try, try, again." Like Thomas, God is more than ready to give us a chance so we can discover that "seeing is believing" but "believing is seeing." Like Thomas, who missed the first meeting on the evening of the day that Jesus rose from the dead, God is still willing to give doubters a Second Chance.

1. Wishful Thinking Frederic Buechner
1. Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit, by David E. Leininger
2. Must We See to Believe?, by Wyvetta Bullock
3. ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by Brett Blair

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we give you thanks for all that has been recorded in the gospels of all that Jesus performed in the presence of the apostles. We rejoice in the other signs too numerous to be written that Christ has given among your people, then and now: the healing of the sick, the peace that has been given to those who have been doubtful but wanting to believe. We exult in the fellowship our risen Lord and live in hope of the final triumph of his rule.

United in Christ, may we become your agents of reconciliation in the church and in the world. Where class and race cause hurtful distinctions, help us to proclaim your covenant promises. Where peoples contend with one another over conflicting ideologies make us the mediators of their differences. Again we decry the brutal slaying of people of faith gathered in worship in California. In all that we do, breathe the Holy Spirit upon us so that we may stand united as brothers and sisters to the glory and praise of your Holy name.

Amen.