

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA      April 16, 2023

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## ***Doubt***

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the time after Easter Sunday we will find ourselves meandering through either the Gospel of John or the Gospel of Luke. We take this journey in order to examine some of the encounters between the disciples and the Risen Lord (which are fairly nonexistent in Mark and Matthew). This Sunday we focus on “Doubting Thomas,” but this theme of encountering the Risen Lord will continue throughout all of the Easter season.

The narrative of “Doubting Thomas” shows us exactly how fickle the human heart and faith can be at times. Martin Luther, in a Sermon on this text notes that the disciples “lie prostrate in great fear and terror, locked up, and will let no one come to them. For this reason they were also terrified at the Lord when he comes and greets them, and they still think (which is indeed a sign that they are completely overcome by fear and despair) they see a spirit or a ghost. So soon they had forgotten all the miracles, signs and words they had seen and heard from him, that the Lord had enough to do during the forty days after his resurrection before he separated from them, in his appearances and revelations in various ways, now to the women, then to the disciples, both individually and collectively, besides eating and drinking with them; all, for the purpose that they might be assured that he is risen. Yet it is so hard for this truth to enter their hearts.”<sup>1</sup>

Luther really feels as though the disciples' memory isn't exactly the greatest! Although, given everything they've just gone through, we can cut them a little slack. But isn't it funny how it often seems to be the case with us humans, that negative experiences often dominate our memories over pleasant ones. When we feel good we often don't even notice. But when we feel bad...wow, then we dwell...even obsess!

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther. “A Sermon for the Sunday after Easter.” John 20:19-31. taken from his Church Postil.

Christ comes to the terrified disciples and speaks a word of peace to them even in the face of their unbelief, even in the face of their poor memories. Christ does the same specifically for Thomas, speaking words of faith and peace into his unbelief too. Christ, through the Holy Spirit, speaks into our unbelief (what comfort! what joy!) and works to turn our unbelief into faith. I ask you now to think of the people in your life through whom God has addressed your unbelief and I challenge you now to give great thanks for them!

Perhaps thanks should be the focus of our life together in the season of Easter. We can certainly give thanks for the many and various ways God has worked in our lives. Who do you credit with influencing your faith in a major way? Do they know that they had such an impact on you? Have you passed something you learned from them on to someone else? Take a moment now to give thanks for them!

There's plenty more reason to give thanks to God though, isn't there. Not just because of God's persistence in reaching out to us with words of love and grace. But we can also give thanks for Christ's persistence in showing us what it means to be human. And that doesn't mean never struggling with uncertainty. Christ in the Garden, hours before his arrest, seem uncertain of what was to come.<sup>2</sup> And Christ shows us what to do with our uncertainties and doubt...take them to God. "Not my will, but yours be done."<sup>3</sup>

God provides persistent love and grace in the face of our unbelief. God gently reminds us of all that God has done for us. God also models for us how to navigate times of trial and crisis. Faced with doubt and unbelief, God works to repair, deepen, and strengthen our relationship with God. In the face of an incredibly stubborn humanity, God's stubborn love wins out!

We have plenty of reason already to give thanks to God! But what about the community we have with one another. Yet another means of navigating trials and doubts...the people around us! I know when I'm at a point in my life where my faith doesn't feel strong, I need my faith community more than ever! When my faith feels weak, I rest in the strong faith of this congregation. When I'm full of doubts, the safe space and loving support that the church provides becomes a sanctuary.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:38-40; Mark 14:35-37; Luke 22:41-42

<sup>3</sup> Luke 22:42b

Look at all that we have to be thankful for! But I wonder...could we also be thankful for doubt? Wiser people than I have made the point that doubt seems to be a necessary component of faith. For doubts cause us to go deeper into our selves; deeper into our values; deeper into our faith. Lord Tennyson makes this point well in his poem, "Doubt and Faith"<sup>4</sup>:

You say, but with no touch of scorn,  
Sweet-hearted, you, whose light-blue eyes  
Are tender over drowning flies,  
You tell me, doubt is Devil-born.

I know not: one indeed I knew  
In many a subtle question versed,  
Who touched a jarring lyre at first,  
But ever strove to make it true:

Perplexed in faith, but pure in deeds,  
At last he beat his music out.  
There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gathered strength,  
He would not make his judgment blind,  
He faced the spectres of the mind  
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;  
And Power was with him in the night,  
Which makes the darkness and the light,  
And dwells not in the light alone,

But in the darkness and the cloud,  
As over Sinai's peaks of old,  
While Israel made their gods of gold,  
Although the trumpet blew so loud.

Indeed, our doubts can lead us into deeper relationship with God and with others. So let us give thanks this Easter season! Give thanks for persistent love and grace, give thanks for gentle reminders of God's Word and activity,

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<sup>4</sup> Lord Alfred Tennyson, from "In Memoriam," XCV

give thanks for the model Christ provides, give thanks for people and communities of support, give thanks even for doubt. Amen.