

# "More Than Doubt: Faith Beyond Fear"

**April 27, 2025 - Second Sunday of Easter - Bishop Janes UMC**

*Edited sermon transcript from John 20:19-31 and Acts 5:27-32*

## Scripture Readings

### **Acts 5:27-32**

When they had brought the apostles, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. Yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you have killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

### **John 20:19-31**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas, who was called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

## Opening Prayer

Heavenly God, we're ever grateful for your word, for your presence, for your love, for your grace. As we come before you this day and continue our journey of Easter, meet us wherever we are in our faith journeys. Help us to understand ever more clearly the truth of Jesus's resurrection and help us grow evermore willing to follow where you lead us, going out into a world that yearns for your love, for your grace. Open our hearts and our minds. Open our eyes and our ears that we might be filled with your spirit. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

## Sermon

It is wonderful to be with you again this week as we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Last week, we had a wonderful gathering as we celebrated spring and new life and joy and new possibilities, and we heard this amazing story that we've heard time and time again in the 20th chapter of John.

It's a story about a woman who has gone to mourn the loss of her beloved teacher, her rabbi, her friend. She shows up at the grave not finding things as she expected. She expected to find a tomb sealed with a stone, but she discovered that the stone had been rolled away and the body of Jesus Christ was gone. In her trauma, in her tears, in her understanding of the world as any human being might understand it, she went to the disciples and said, "Somebody's taken my Lord away."

The disciples came. They saw that the body was missing. They saw that the stone was moved, and they believed Mary's story that somebody had taken this body away. As Mary continues to sit there in her mourning and in her tears, angels appear and Jesus comes, but she still doesn't recognize him until he speaks her name. It's at that point that Mary is the first person, as described by the gospel of John, to understand the truth that Christ has risen. Mary goes from being a follower of Jesus Christ to the first apostle, the first one bearing the good news, and she runs to these people who are deeply dear friends of Jesus who were students of Jesus and she proclaims, "I have seen the Lord."

I want to pause here and ask you to think honestly: what questions are lingering in your heart about the resurrection? Where do you find it hard to receive this story? What do you want God to explain to you so that you can believe that Christ has risen, he has risen indeed?

I feel like as a pastor, I ought to be up in front of you having no questions whatsoever in my heart, but like you, I have questions, and my journey of faith has brought me places where I've wrestled with many of these questions. Those questions include the obvious: How did God do it? How is this even possible? They might include: Why did God have to do it? Why is it so important? Or even: How did the disciples who journeyed with Jesus for three years and heard him tell this story again and again, still not even believe that this actually happened?

These are all good questions, and today as we think about this passage, I want us to come before God with all of those honest questions in our heart. Because when we come to God with honesty and openness, God meets us where we are. Today I want us to journey from a place of fear and doubt to a place of belief and peace.

Today's reading from the gospel of John continued the story of Easter. After the disciples heard the story from Mary, they were gathered in an upper room where they had celebrated the last supper, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders that had put Jesus to death. I think any of us can relate to what it feels like to just not trust what's going on outside of our doors and just want to lock the doors and feel safe and secure in a place where at least we have each other.

The disciples were afraid that if they went back out into the world, they too would be arrested. They too would be crucified, and they were fearful of what would happen. And in their fear, Jesus shows up in that place where the doors were locked. Jesus somehow appears before them.

This is not a Scooby-Doo episode where we wonder how the guy in the mask got into the place and spooked people out, but then find out that there's a trap door. It's not the case. Jesus appears, and the first words out of his mouth are, "Peace be with you."

Friends, when I'm scared, the first thing I need to hear from somebody that I've come to rely on is "peace be with you." Think of those times when you were a child and you were afraid, and your parent came and in their own way said, "Peace be with you."

Jesus comes to bring them peace. He comes to affirm the story that Mary has shared with them. After granting them this peace, after showing them his hands and his side (and sight is one of the key senses in the 20th chapter of John—they see the hands, they see the mark in his side), he then says, "I send you out into the world as God has sent me into the world. Now that I am leaving the world, it is up to you to carry on the work that I began, and I send you out into the world not by yourself, but having received the gift of the Holy Spirit"—the Holy Spirit to comfort them, to teach them, to lead them, to guide them, to encourage them, and to continue to teach them the lessons that Jesus began to teach them.

One of them isn't there—Thomas. We don't know where he's gone, but he's out. He comes back and ten of his closest friends, along with Mary, tell him, "We have seen the Lord."

Friends, Thomas is the most real person for me in this passage because he has heard this story much like all of us have heard this story, and he says, "Unless I see the mark in his hands, unless I put my finger in the hole in his hands and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas doesn't have the benefit of having seen Jesus Christ. Thomas didn't have the benefit of having seen the empty tomb and the cloths at one end and the headscarf at the other end. Thomas only receives the word of mouth, the same way that each and every one of us has come to our faith.

A week later, the disciples are back in that upper room. This time the doors are only closed, they're not locked, and they're not gathered in fear. Thomas is with them. Jesus comes again. He comes before Thomas, not with anger in his heart, without a shroud of disappointment, and simply says, "Put your finger in my hand. Put your hand in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

What I think is so wonderful about this story about Thomas is that Jesus comes to him with the questions that he has and he gives him the answers that he needs that he might come to believe. And in this story is a story of hope for each and every one of us who comes before God with our honest questions—God will meet us. God will meet you wherever you are with whatever questions you have and give you the answers that you need, that you too might come to believe.

John closes out his gospel (at least we believe this was the original end of the gospel) with these words: "All of these things have been written so that you might continue to believe and have life in His name." John was all about people receiving the eternal life and the forgiveness of sins that Jesus came to give, that we might live the life that God gave us and live it in the most abundant way possible. And he understood that the only way that that could happen is by believing in Jesus Christ—not only that he existed, not only in the lessons that he gave, but in the most incredible part of his story: that he was raised from the dead by God.

You might be sitting here saying, "Well, why does this matter so much? What changes when we believe in the resurrection?" For that, we go to the reading that we heard from the fifth chapter of Acts. Peter and the other apostles (as they're all known now—they're not disciples, they're no longer students, they are the ones out sharing the good news of Jesus Christ) have been arrested and they've been brought before the same Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus to death. And they're being accused of teaching in his name.

Friends, let's remark on what has changed here. In the 20th chapter of John, before they were affirmed of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, before they received the Holy Spirit, they were hiding behind locked doors or behind closed doors. They were afraid to go out in public. But having received the Holy Spirit, having come to a place where they believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, they are ready to go out and publicly proclaim the good news as they have come to understand it. And they stand before this Sanhedrin, this council that they were in fear of, proclaiming: "Even though you tried to put Jesus to death, God raised him from the dead, and who do you think we're going to listen to? The people who tried to kill him or the one who raised him?"

They couldn't be silent. They weren't going to be afraid of those people who said, "Don't do it," because they believed without a doubt that God had raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and that was the God that they were going to listen to.

Friends, we live in a world today where we need people—we are desperate for people—who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who believe in the God who raised him from the dead, and are ready to follow in God's ways and obey God's ways rather than trying to give in to the powers of this world and the people who tell us to be quiet.

There are people in this world who need us to boldly go out and raise our voices in support of them who have no voice in this world. There are people in this world who need us to be those who stand before our modern-day Sanhedrin in the town councils and in the township committees and say, "We need to create a community where people are treated well, where people can have the basic necessities of life, where everyone has an opportunity to find a place to live, where justice reigns, where people don't need to live in fear."

Those voices are needed. We need to be those who are ready to go out into the world because of our faith in the risen Christ and offer forgiveness and love one another and breach all of the things that the world creates to separate us from one another. We do it not just because we're following the teachings of a good rabbi. We do it not just because we want to do it. We do it because we believe in the risen Christ.

Some questions might be in your hearts: "Well, what do I do with my questions? How do I come to a place where I believe?" To help you along with that, I want to share with you a story that I came upon. It's about a mythologist named Martin Shaw. Here's his story:

*[The pastor then shares the story of Martin Shaw, a mythologist who had grown up in a Christian home but left the faith as a teenager, only to have a profound spiritual experience in nature decades later that led him back to faith in Christ.]*

God doesn't want us to come to church for transactions. He wants us to come to church for transformation. He wants to meet you where you are. He embraces all of your questions and says, "Bring them all to me and I will meet you wherever you are and bring you the answers that you need so that you too come to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

So what do we do to help us believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

The first thing that our story made clear is that the resurrected Christ needs to come and meet us where we are. Well, how do I do that? What do I do to make that happen? Some of you might have been wanting that to happen for years. I wish I could tell you a three-step process to make that happen, but the common thing is this: the people to whom Christ appeared were open to him appearing to them.

The disciples, Mary—all stayed around long enough. Martin was in the forest for 101 days. Now, if you're like me, you don't have 101 days to spend in the forest, but you might have a weekend to go on a retreat. You might choose to enter into a period of intentional silence. You might choose to engage prayer in a different way. You might choose to say, "I'm going to show up anytime I have the opportunity to come and worship God." It's in those moments when we least expect it that Christ meets us where we are.

The second piece of these stories that is common is the presence of the Holy Spirit. For many of us, we want to receive the Holy Spirit, but in the midst of wanting to receive the Holy Spirit, we are engaged in the busyness of life, and we never stop long enough to wonder: Where is the Holy Spirit inviting me to go? What is God prompting me to do? How is God revealing himself to me? What is God saying to me?

Again, stillness. "Be still and know that I am God." Be still enough to listen to God's still, small voice. Peter shared that the Holy Spirit was poured out on those who obey the way of the Lord. Are we ready to obey the way of the Lord that we too might receive his Holy Spirit?

And finally—and this is great news—you're exactly where you need to be: in a community of those who are seeking God. Today, it is going to be our honor and privilege to welcome Ella as a baptized member and her parents as members of our church. They have come before us asking to be a part of this community so that they can grow in their faith, and we as a community are going to be covenanting with them to raise Ella in the faith that she too might come to believe in the resurrection and proclaim Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

It is a high calling that we have all embraced for one another, but this is where it happens—in community, where we can teach one another, share our experiences with one another, encourage one another, and even share our doubts and questions, because that's where transformation happens.

My prayer for all of us is that we come to be those people who proclaim it loud and proud that "Christ has risen, he has risen indeed," and go out into the world with that belief planted deep within our hearts—that we might be ready to be the hands and feet of Christ to a world that longs for his light and his love. Amen.