
THE REASON FOR COMING TOGETHER

Let me begin by asking you a couple of questions.

- First, how many of you believe, really believe, that JESUS rose from the dead?
- Second, why are you here for worship?

These may seem like odd questions for this Sunday after Easter.

- They also may or may not seem quite unrelated.
- Well, let me deal with the second question first.

Why is it that we come together to worship each week?

- It isn't so that we can make GOD happy—though I'm sure that our worship and praise does.
- It isn't to learn sound morals—though perhaps that happens.
- It isn't even to learn the fundamental and essential parts of the Christian faith—though it would be nice if that happens from time to time, too.

Rather, we gather for worship so that we might encounter—that we might meet, or better yet, be met by the risen CHRIST one more time,

- and be caught up in faith so that we might glimpse and somehow grasp GOD's abundant life for ourselves.

We come together because the life of faith can be joyous and wonderful,

- but it can also be, and often is, rather challenging.
- The loss of a loved one.
- The end of a relationship.
- The inability to find meaningful and productive work.
- The frustration of not getting into the school of one's choice.
- The persistent ache of loneliness,
- A prolonged bout of illness.
- A pervasive sense of anxiety about our family, community, country, or the world.
 - All these things can wear at you and burden you.
 - But it is at these times, in the midst of these trials, that faith can be such tremendous strength and support.
 - The truth is also that these things can cause faith to be a casualty of these assaults on our sense of peace.

So, we come together to hear the stories of JESUS read and interpreted,

- and so that we might hear JESUS speaking to us,
- and, in turn, leave with a renewed sense of hope, and faith, and confidence in spite of the world around us.

It is from this vantage point, that we hear JESUS' words to Thomas.

- Often, they are perceived as a rebuke of Thomas for his lack of believing.

But perhaps that is not really what they are.

- Perhaps they are rather more of a blessing to all who come after Thomas—right up to all of us.
- Perhaps they are a gift and promise to all of us who are here, believing, though we have not seen.

I asked you at the beginning if you really believed that JESUS had risen from the dead. Many of you raised your hands to say, "Yes." Why?

- Because the Bible says so? Yes.
- Because so many others throughout your life have believed? Yes, that too.
- Because you yourself have seen the risen LORD? Most likely not.
 - Though because of the faith of all these others, because of the faith of this community and those who have witnessed to you with their lives, there is almost a sense—a sort of memory—that feels like you have seen.
 - Because of your faith that these things are true, they have become true and real for you,
 - a sense that you have and do meet the risen CHRIST each time you come here,
 - or, more importantly, a sense that HE sees you and meets you each time you come.
- That sense, that feeling, is part of the blessing of believing without having seen,
 - blessed to know that JESUS sees you and knows you and loves you.

Thomas has come to be known as the greatest doubter of all time.

- Through history Judas has been the only disciple criticized more than Thomas.
- Tradition has given him a new name: "Doubting Thomas."
 - He wanted proof that JESUS was resurrected from the dead.
 - But can you blame him?

When the resurrected CHRIST appeared to some of HIS disciples, Thomas was not there.

- Can you imagine seeing someone die, knowing HE was buried, and then hearing from friends that they had seen HIM alive?
- You might wonder about their words, if they were playing a trick on you.
- If they keep telling you on and on, you might feel a need to confront them.
 - That was the situation for Thomas.

In recent years, many Christians have been more sympathetic to Thomas.

- They have recognized that if they had been in the same position, they may have had the same doubts.
- In the same position, I am sure that I would have been a doubter.
 - My nickname might have become, "Doubting Jeffrey."

Devotional writer Selwyn Hughes wrote "Those who doubt most, and yet strive to overcome their doubts, turn out to be some of CHRIST's strongest disciples."

- Thomas was transformed, saying, "My LORD and my GOD!"
 - That doesn't hit us as powerfully as it would have the original disciples.
 - Before that day, they called JESUS rabbi, meaning teacher.
 - They called him CHRIST, meaning the ANOINTED ONE.
 - They called him the SON of the living GOD.
 - No one, before Thomas, had called JESUS, "GOD."
- Jewish leaders would not have hesitated to pass the death sentence on Thomas for blasphemy.
 - It was an incredible and dangerous thing to say.

The Bible says that the one who had been most honest about his doubts was the first to call JESUS, "GOD."

- There are traditions that say Thomas was the disciple who traveled furthest to tell others about CHRIST.
 - Tradition says that he proclaimed the gospel in Babylon, Persia, and all the way to India.
 - In truth, there are more Christian churches in India named for Thomas than for anyone else beside the Virgin Mary.

Since we're talking about Thomas and his doubts, it's important to understand that doubt isn't the opposite of faith.

- Thomas may have had his doubts, but he was there.
- Remember, the other disciples were behind locked doors when JESUS appeared to them
 - They saw the risen LORD and believed.
- Thomas wanted nothing more than that, but also nothing less.
 - He wanted to see too for himself.

Again, though, doubt isn't the opposite of faith.

- In truth, it is certainty that is the opposite of faith.
- Where there is certainty, there is no room for faith.

Doubt is one element of faith.

- Certainty is missing the point entirely.

Anne Lamott: Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness, the discomfort, and letting it stay there until the light returns.

Maybe it makes sense that the first Sunday after Easter every year focuses on this passage about Thomas.

- Many clergy refer to the Second Sunday of Easter as "Low Sunday," because attendance usually drops significantly just after the Easter celebration.

But you are here.

- You are the critical mass of folks who come on Easter *and* on the week after Easter.

It is to you that I want to ask one more set of questions:

- What would it look like to consider – or, perhaps, reconsider – everything our congregation does in light of the hope that through the life of this community of faith that more and more people would encounter JESUS and come to faith and experience GOD's abundant life?
 - What might worship look like?
 - And youth ministry?
 - And Christian education and formation?
 - And social ministry to the community and world?
 - I know it may seem an odd time to raise these questions,
 - but I actually think it's kind of the perfect time, because right now as we are returning from the pandemic is as good as any to think about these things.
 - You are the core believers who might just take this message to heart and think about how we could make this opportunity to see CHRIST and be seen by HIM available to many more people.
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We come together each week so that JESUS might encounter us and, through this encounter, change us into the people GOD wants us to be.

- That kind of change doesn't happen overnight.
- But praise GOD that there is another Sunday just seven days away!

You are here today, and I know you will be here most other Sundays.

- You will come, with your trust and your doubts and again meet and be seen by the risen LORD.
- And then, hopefully, by the leading of the Spirit, you will find ways and help us find ways to bring others,
 - that they, too, can come to know and be known by JESUS.
- You are the ones who are ready to confess, "My LORD and my GOD."
 - Let us also be the ones who first ask GOD to show us how to share with others the reason for coming together.