

Finger Pointing

My brother, whose name—like that of the disciple in today’s Scripture reading—also happens to be Thomas, is famous in my eyes for a couple of things he has done with his index finger. We were once visiting a used car lot in Duncansville, looking for a car. We found one that interested us, but could see that it had been freshly painted. My brother saw a spot that looked suspicious and poked at it with his finger. The body putty gave way, revealing the fact that the car was rusted through. The car dealer wasn’t too happy, but my brother’s finger saved us from buying a lemon.

On another occasion Tom and I were attending a wedding reception together. As we were going through the buffet line, we noticed a suspicious looking centerpiece in the middle of the table. It looked like a pretend, probably iced cardboard or styrofoam, wedding cake was being used to decorate the table, but we weren’t quite sure. I said, “It looks fake.” But Tom wasn’t about to take my word for it. He poked it with his index finger and much to my amusement and to his horror his finger didn’t hit any cardboard or styrofoam. The cake was real through and through, and to make matters worse it turned out to be the wedding cake, which the bride and groom later cut and smeared on each other’s faces. It’s interesting what you can find out and what trouble you can get into with your number one finger.

In our Scripture passage from the end of John 20, we discover another Thomas with a restless finger. The verses leading up to Thomas’ entrance set the stage: John 20:19-23 in the NASB say: *“So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side.*

The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.’”

2

We notice several things in these verses. We notice that the resurrected Christ had the power to walk through locked doors or stone walls. I have made the observation over the years that there was no need for the stone to be rolled away from the entrance to Jesus’ tomb to let Him out. Just as He could walk through walls to appear to His disciples, He could also—and probably did—walk through that stone to appear to Mary in the garden. The stone was not rolled away to let Jesus out but to let us see in.

Secondly, we notice that Jesus made a point of showing His disciples His crucifixion wounds. “He showed them both His hands and His side.” He wanted them and us to know that it was really Him, alive from the grave. He also wanted them and us to remember what price He paid for our salvation.

The third thing we see here is that the disciples of Jesus were given a mission and the power to succeed in that mission. They were, and we are, sent into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to discern and to announce what God has done. Those who believe and receive Christ as Savior are forgiven through His sacrifice. Those who do not believe and refuse Christ have no remedy; they are unforgiven until such a time as they change their minds and reach out to the Christ Who is reaching out to them.

It seems to me that these verses leading up to the entrance of Thomas are crucial to our understanding of what Thomas’ encounter with the risen Christ is all about. We tend to give Thomas a “bad rap.” We call him “doubting Thomas” because of his honest confession: John 20:24 & 25 tell us: *“But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.’”*

What we notice here at first glance is that Thomas was not asking for anything more than what the other disciples had already received. Jesus had appeared to the others. Jesus had shown them the marks of the nails in His hands and the wound in His side, opened by the soldier’s spear. We can hardly blame Thomas for asking for a level playing field.

3

But, then again, maybe it was his finger that got him into trouble. Thomas demanded to have what the others had been freely given. He also made an ill advised vow: *“Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.”*

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call Thomas “demanding Thomas,” instead of “doubting Thomas.” Here was a man giving an ultimatum to God, a man putting conditions on the unconditional love of Christ. *“Unless I see with my own eyes, unless I poke Him with my finger, unless I can put my hand into His side” . . . “Unless,” “Unless,” “Unless”*

Thomas seems to be the poster boy for anyone trying to bargain with, or to manipulate God. We might wonder why Jesus chose to bother with him—to give him the time of day. But I think Jesus saw something beneath Thomas’ brash statement. Thomas could have been revealing two different things with the same words. Option #1: Thomas could have been copping an excuse for why he wouldn’t believe. In other words, Thomas didn’t want to believe, and the fact that he hadn’t seen what the others had seen would be his firewall against belief, his reason for not believing.

But, Option #2, goes like this: Thomas desperately wanted to believe on par with the others. His words were not so much an expression of doubt as an expression of longing. Thomas was struggling to believe, but he wanted to believe more than anything else in the world, so much so, that, like Job before him, he would wag his finger toward God and demand a personal interview. I choose option 2.

And, do you know what? I think that whenever someone gets that desperate for God, that hungry for God, he or she will always get God’s attention. Thomas’ demand to see and touch Jesus was not born of doubt but was a reflection of an infant faith crying out to be nursed.

Every parent here this morning can identify with that. When your baby is hungry that baby will let you know in no uncertain terms. The longer you put off feeding that child the louder will be her wail. And that wail pierces your heart, doesn’t it? Whether it’s the middle of the day or the middle of the night you will give of yourself to feed your child. Psalm 103:13 says, *“As a father pities his children, So the Lord pities those*

who fear Him.” In Luke 18:7, Jesus says, “Now, will God not judge in favor of his own people who cry to Him day and night for help?”

Thomas was crying out for help and Jesus gave it. But, in giving that help, Jesus also makes it clear that Thomas is pushing the boundaries. Wanting to see was one thing, but claiming that he would not believe without putting his finger into the print of the nails in Jesus’ hands and thrusting his hand into Jesus’ side, was over the top. Jesus let Thomas know that He had heard his idle boastful words and that he was being held accountable for saying them. Jesus shamed Thomas by inviting him to do what he said he wanted to do; Jesus offered Thomas his hands and his side. I don’t believe, however, that Thomas ever followed through with his boast. John makes no mention of him doing so, only that Thomas upon seeing and hearing Jesus fell at Jesus’ feet with the confession of faith on his lips: “My Lord and my God!”

Finally, Jesus tells Thomas, and tells us through Thomas, that there is a greater faith, a faith more pleasing to God, and that is a faith that requires no outward proof. Seeing is no guarantee of believing but believing will open our eyes to the kingdom of God. When we are still before God and open our hearts to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit and yield to the authority of God’s word, that is the greater faith and the source of greater blessing. In John 20:29 Jesus tells Thomas: “Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!”

Turning our attention to our Scripture reading from I Peter 1:3-9, we are given another promise for those who believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I Peter 1:3-5 say:

“Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his great mercy he gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death. This fills us with a living hope, and so we look forward to possessing the rich blessings that God keeps for his people. He keeps them for you in heaven, where they cannot decay or spoil or fade away. They are for you, who through faith are kept safe by God’s power for the salvation which is ready to be revealed at the end of time.”

It’s instructive for us that in the first chapter of his first letter to the churches, Peter gives the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as the foundation for all he says thereafter. In chapter two of his epistle, Peter

gives the wonderful picture of the church as a holy temple being built with many believers, whom he calls living stones. Our belief in the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of that spiritual temple which is being built.

The secret of having a living hope is that “we look forward to possessing the rich blessings that God keeps for his people” “in heaven”. Here, like the spires of many churches, we can use our index fingers to point upwards and say: “There’s where my true possessions lie, there’s where my treasure is, there’s my inheritance, my true reward.” “No matter what trials, heartaches or humiliations I must face in this world for the sake of Christ, I can face them with courage because I know that blessings without end are laid up for me in heaven.

As Peter continues to unfold his message, we notice how his words fit with Jesus’ words to Thomas. I Peter 1:6-9 lay it out like this:

Be glad about this, even though it may now be necessary for you to be sad for a while because of the many kinds of trials you suffer. Their purpose is to prove that your faith is genuine. Even gold, which can be destroyed, is tested by fire; and so your faith, which is much more precious than gold, must also be tested, so that it may endure. Then you will receive praise and glory and honor on the Day when Jesus Christ is revealed. You love Him, although you have not seen Him, and you believe in Him, although you do not now see Him. So you rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls, which is the purpose of your faith in Him.

What we learn here is that our trials have a purpose. Our trials test us and, by putting us to the test, purify and strengthen our faith. Furthermore, we learn that the early believers, to whom Peter was writing, were no different from us. Although Peter had seen the Lord risen from the dead, those to whom he wrote had not. Yet Peter can say to them: “You love Him, although you have not seen Him, and you believe in Him, although you do not now see Him.” The question for us today is “Do we?” Do we love Jesus and believe in Him without seeing Him with our physical eyes, without putting our fingers into His wounds? According to Jesus and according to Peter this is the greater faith and this is the way to greater blessing.

The Fourth Street Church of God

4thstcog.com

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for April 23, 2017

Finger Pointing

John 20:19-31; I Peter 1:3-9

Jon R. Neely, Pastor
neelyjon@gmail.com