

**John 20:19-31** <sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>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.’ <sup>26</sup>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.’ <sup>27</sup>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.’ <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ <sup>29</sup>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.’ <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>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.

John 20:19-31

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“A Laughing Matter”

Rev. Amy Terhune

One of the most dangerous things a pastor does every week is the Children’s sermon. When you talk to kids and ask them questions, you never know what answers you’re going to get. I remember a colleague of mine used to always use a prop, which he’d hide in a paper bag until he was ready to show it. He continued this tradition when he was appointed to his next church. On his very first Sunday, he said to the kids: Can you guess what I have in this bag? And one of the little girls said, “Whiskey?” I don’t know whether the preacher or the little girl’s parents were more embarrassed. And just last week – true story – another colleague of mine who I will not name, was asking kids if they knew what resurrection was. One of the little boys raised his hand and said (honest truth!): “I know that if you have a resurrection that lasts more than four hours you are supposed to call the doctor.” It took several minutes to restore order and decorum.

I learned recently that the Sunday after Easter in Medieval times was called “Holy Humor Sunday”. It fell out of favor at some point when someone decided it wasn’t appropriate to laugh in church, but in more recent years, people have been bringing it back. Laughter is good for the soul. Especially in tough years like this one has been. And laughter is good theology for the week following Easter. Life has the last laugh, you see, and resurrection should last way longer than four hours – it should last a lifetime.

But on that First Easter Sunday all those centuries ago, the disciples were not laughing. They were hiding. Behind locked doors. In fear. According to Matthew, Luke, and John, the women who had followed Jesus had been to the tomb, and returned with strange news. No body, just grave clothes. No stone, just emptiness. No answers, just angels...and questions. The rumors fly. Speculation runs rampant. The authorities think the disciples have stolen the body to perpetuate a hoax. The disciples are afraid for their lives, bewildered by events, plagued with guilt and insecurity.

“We can identify with the anxious, fearful disciples of Jesus. The disciples were hovering nervously in the Upper Room. The doors were shut, says John's Gospel, "for fear of the Jews." How tragic it is anytime the doors of the church are shut because of fear. [from “Behind Closed Doors” by

King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] But they were. Locked shut. And all the disciples are there, hashing things out with one another in hushed voices. All but one disciple, that is. But we'll get back to him.

And then, into that locked room, dispelling anxiety-ridden air and gloomy shadows, comes the Risen Christ. Friends, you may think this is a record of a historical event that happened long ago. But if Easter teaches us anything, it's that the risen Christ cannot be confined to yesteryear. Today, this very moment, the risen Christ still shows up behind locked doors.

Tom Long tells a story that, while perhaps not too terrorizing to any of you, is a pastor's worst nightmare, after difficult childrens' sermons. He relates a time that a worship service went all wrong. It happens. He was scheduled to be a guest preacher at an evening communion service at a nearby church.

"The church staff had planned this service to be educational as well as worshipful. The idea was that, first, the congregation would gather in the sanctuary and Tom would give a brief talk about the meanings of the Lord's Supper. Then, they would go into the fellowship hall and be seated around tables for the service itself.

"At each table there would be the flour and other ingredients to form the dough for the communion loaves. The plan called for each table to prepare a loaf and, while the loaves baked in the ovens of the church kitchen, the people at each table were to engage in various exercises designed to get them talking about their experiences in the faith.

"It was a good idea, but like many well-planned events, things looked better on the drawing board than they turned out in reality. There were problems. Children at many tables began to play in the baking ingredients, and white clouds of flour floated around the room coating everybody and everything. There were delays in the kitchen, and the communion bread baked with agonizing slowness. Some of the tables ran out of things to say; children grew weary and fussy; the room was filled with commotion and restlessness. The planners had dreamed of an event of excitement, innovation, peak learning, and moving worship. But instead, what happened was chaos, noise, exhaustion, and people making the best of a difficult situation.

"Finally, the service ended, and, with no little relief, Tom was able to pronounce the benediction. "The peace of Christ be with you all," he said, and just as he said that, a child's voice from somewhere in the room called out strong and true, "It already is!" [4 ¶s adapted from Thomas G. Long, *Whispering The Lyrics*, CSS Publishing; illustrations on [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] Worship service redeemed.

Out of the mouths of babes, right? It already is! That's the message. In the chaos. In the confusion. In the uncertainty. In the fear. In broken relationships. In the cancer ward. On the battlefield. At the accident scene. In the closing factory. In the unemployment line. In the middle of the night. In the middle of pandemic. In the middle of surges and shootings. At the graveside. He already is. In all of it, Jesus finds his way through locked doors, barricaded hearts, and closed minds to be present to us. When we look for Jesus, we find he is—he is already working. He is already present. He is already available. He is all ready to take on whatever burdens, fears, and lingering questions bring us down. He is ready to give peace. We need only quiet our mind long enough to accept it. Jesus unlocks the doors of fear.

Jesus also unlocks the doors of doubt and disillusionment. Christ accepts us where and as we are. Here's where Thomas comes in. Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared in their midst that first Easter. We don't know why. But we do know that the other disciples tell him about it. We know that he says "unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in those marks and my hand in his side, I will not believe." *I will not*—it's a choice. Thomas never says he doesn't want to believe. On the contrary, he wants very much to believe, but he's been hurt too deeply by all of this to just take it on hearsay—no matter who is saying it. And we know that despite his supposed refusal to believe, he's not absent again. He's there with the others, hoping in spite of himself to have his own doubts proven wrong, I suspect.

So Jesus comes to him. There is no judgment, no guilt-trip. No confession or absolution

required. Jesus offers him what he needs to believe: “Touch, me Thomas. Go ahead. Do not doubt, but believe.” I’m a little intrigued, actually, about how quick we are to make Thomas the poster child for faithless doubt. After all, the rest aren’t much better. The women go to the tomb, but can hardly believe what they’re being told, the men write the women’s story off as an idle tale not to be believed, Peter runs back to see for himself, but reaches no conclusion. And now, here are the “faithful” disciples—after having seen the risen Christ and received the Holy Spirit—still locked in the upper room, hiding out! [this ¶ adapted from “Doubting or Courageous Thomas?” by Susan Russell, <https://desperatepreacher.com/sermonbuilder/pool/doubting.htm>.]

Doubting Thomas? They’re all doubting! Thomas is just honest about it, that’s all. Thomas is one of those who will never say he understands when he doesn’t or say he believes when he can’t. There’s an uncompromising honesty about Thomas that I respect: he knows that he will never quiet his doubts by pretending they’re not there. And neither will we. [this ¶ adapted from “When Thomas Doubted” by Jerry L. Schmaleberger, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

In this day and age, nothing speaks louder than proof. We demand it in science. In everything from practical medicine to out-there theories, scientists must test their hypotheses and experiments, and have them corroborated by others. We demand it in law—one is innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. We demand it in matters of finance, proof that stocks perform, proof that what we’re getting is worth the investment. And even in the church, proof is required. How does one prove their church is ‘successful’. All too often it has to do numbers—how many members, how big a budget, how many on staff? Proof. Some might say that our culture is obsessed with proof, but stories like the one John records of ‘Doubting Thomas’ indicate that proof has always been important. Four hundred years before Christ, Aristotle, building on the wisdom of his teacher Socrates, drew up fairly clear and concise steps for proving truths in arguments. And 1000 years before him, the Israelites demanded proof of God’s care for them in the desert. They got a divided sea, manna in the morning, quail in the evening, water from a rock, protection from enemies, pillars of cloud and fire, and after all that, they still wanted proof. Proof. The demand for proof seems to be built in to the human psyche.

But what constitutes proof? Where does one draw the line between speculation and proven fact? What’s reasonable doubt? What’s unreasonable doubt? These questions reveal the gray areas in human existence. This is perhaps why two scientists, two judges, two financial experts, two bishops, two individuals can be presented with exactly the same data and reach entirely different conclusions. And not only that, but criteria for proof has changed over time. Three thousand years ago, one would look at natural disasters, disease, or deformity as proof of God’s displeasure. Today, no one in their right mind would tell a cancer patient or a flood victim that they are less in God’s eyes. Proof is a slippery animal—it is subject to human error, human reasoning, and varies with each given particular human culture. Throughout human history, even when faced with overwhelming evidence, many times proof has been rejected to protect a society’s vested interests.

I’m not here this morning to tell you that the human desire for proof is bad or wrong or futile or childish. On the contrary, I think that often our desire for proof is driven by some of the best attributes of human nature—curiosity, the desire to learn, to grow, to know, the quest for security, for connectedness, for truth, for what’s right. Like all human endeavors, the quest can be misused or misguided, but in general, our quest is what makes us truly human.

John tells us that he has written down these stories so that we might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, we may have life in his name. That’s the point—that’s why John tells us these things. He wants us to believe. Now what better way to help us get to faith that by assuring us that doubts are going to be a part of the experience—that Jesus can be present with us and to us even in the midst of our doubts, and that those doubts can be the soil in which the seeds of faith find grounding and nourishment. Jesus has never been harsh with honest doubters—the rich young ruler, or Nicodemus that comes in the night. Thomas comes with doubts, but leaves with faith he’ll eventually die to defend.

“Dorothy Sayers says this about Thomas: It is unexpected, but extraordinarily convincing, that the one absolutely unequivocal statement in the whole gospel of the Divinity of Jesus should come from Doubting Thomas. It is the only place where the word ‘God’ is used without qualification of any kind, and in the most unambiguous form of words. And he does not say it ecstatically, or with a cry of astonishment but with flat conviction, as of one acknowledging irrefutable evidence that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , that the sun is in the sky. Thomas says, you are my Lord and my God!” [from Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King* (London: Victor Collanz, 1943), 319-20; illustrations on [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Famed comedian Bob Hope and his wife Delores were married for 69 years, one of the longest Hollywood marriages on record. Many years ago, they boarded a plane after one of their many shows, along with a few members of Bob’s staff. Now Delores was a devout Catholic, and was delighted to discover as they took their seats that two priests were seated in front of her and three nuns were seated behind her. One of Hope’s writers named Charlie Lee was also on the flight. After surveying the situation briefly, Lee turned to Hope and asked, “Why can’t she take out regular flight insurance, like the rest of us?” [This ¶ adapted from Bob Hope, *The Road to Hollywood*, p. 38; as used in “Blessed Are Those Who Believe” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Delores Hope didn’t need flight insurance. And neither did Thomas. His heart was warmed to the quick, his fears were subsumed in bold proclamation, and the tears were transformed from grief to laughter as Thomas and the other disciples were launched headfirst and joyously into the next phase of Jesus’ mission to renew the world.

We would all like flight insurance for this journey of faith. We’d all like to have absolute proof, but sometimes, we need to respond as Thomas did. We fall to our knees. We open ourselves to the Christ who already is – who meets us in our fears, our doubts, our disillusionment, our broken dreams, our pain. I can’t touch the wounds or see the scars or hear Christ’s voice. But I stand before you today as one who Jesus touched. I would tell you it’s no laughing matter. But it is! It is joy and hope and life in His name. Thanks be to God! Amen.