

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

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April 28, 2019; 2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C

Jonah 1, John 20:19-31

“But [Thomas] 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.’”

- John 20:25b

They came by ship, after a long and perilous ocean journey. Setting out from their home country of Portugal in the year of our Lord 1497, Captain Vasco da Gama and his crew sailed to the Cape Verde Islands. Then they boldly ventured out into the open ocean, heading west — following the track of Christopher Columbus, five years earlier. They had nearly reached the coast of Brazil before they found the prevailing winds they’d been searching for. The winds blew their ships eastward, to the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa.

From there, they worked their way up the east coast of Africa, as far as present-day Kenya. Then, taking on an Arab pilot, they struck out eastward, into the open ocean. At last they reached their goal: the west coast of India — the very place Columbus had been headed, before bumping into the American continent.

Like all the Spanish and Portuguese explorers, Da Gama’s journey had been designed with two goals in mind. The first — probably the most important, in his own mind — was commercial. He wanted to corner the world spice market, breaking the monopoly of the Arab traders with their overland caravans. He

wanted to be able to transport costly Indian spices directly to Europe by sea. If Da Gama could succeed in this, he would make himself — and his financial backers, back in Lisbon — a fortune. We're talking a Bill Gates or Jeff Bezos sort of fortune, here.

The second purpose of his journey was religious. Da Gama carried on his ships Roman Catholic priests, men of missionary zeal. They wanted to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the Indian subcontinent.

But when they finally did reach the coast of India, those Portuguese missionaries were in for a surprise. They found Christians already there: whole communities of them, with churches and priests, and a tradition of the faith going back longer, even, than in their own nation.

Who were these Christians? They followed a form of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Their scriptures were in the Syriac language. They called themselves *Mar Thoma* Christians. The "Thoma" in their name referred to the Apostle Thomas. They were "the Church of Thomas."

They told their Portuguese visitors how Thomas had traveled, after Jesus' resurrection, as far as the west coast of India. He visited communities of Jews who were living and trading there. It was among these people that he established their church that was still flourishing, nearly 15 centuries later. There are millions of

Mar Thoma Christians today, far more than there are Presbyterians here in the U.S.A.

Historians have debated ever since whether Thomas could really have made it that far. No one can say for sure. Yet, how else could the Christian faith have gotten to India in those very early days, unless someone brought it? And if the oral tradition of those Christians says it was the apostle Thomas — a tradition so strong, it included naming their church after him — then it seems likely there's something to the tale.

If there's even a germ of truth in their story, then move over, Paul of Tarsus! As impressive as your missionary journeys were, you just sailed around the big bathtub of the Mediterranean. There is one who traveled farther than you ever did, and communicated the faith not only to people who spoke your own language, but to those of Eastern lands.

And what's the adjective we typically attach to the name of this Apostle, Thomas? You know what it is. It grows out of the Gospel story we read this morning. The adjective, of course, is "doubting." *Doubting Thomas*.

Considering Thomas' incredible journey that took him eastward through Arabia and Persia, and down the west coast of India — founding an entire branch

of Christianity that flourishes to this day — that word “doubting” is a rather unfair blot on his reputation, wouldn’t you say?

You can see signs of Thomas’ courage and determination earlier in John’s Gospel. An urgent message has come to Jesus, to go help his good friend Lazarus, who’s fallen gravely ill. It’s getting dangerous out there. The disciples all know it. Already, a group of Jesus’ religious opponents have tried to stone him.

“Are you *sure* we should go there, Lord?” some of them ask. “To *Bethany*? We may never make it out of there alive!”

A lively debate ensues. Jesus, it’s clear, is determined to go, no matter what the cost. The rest of them are not at all sure it’s a good idea to go with him.

What puts an end to the debate, as John tells it, is a statement Thomas makes: “Let us go, that we may die with him.” No sign of doubt, there!

To the *Mar Thoma* Christians of India, he is not “Doubting Thomas.” He’s Believing Thomas, their great father in the faith, the one who risked life and limb in a perilous journey to bring them the gospel.

So, what *is* it that really happens, here, in that Gospel story John tells, that I read for you this morning? On the evening of the Day of Resurrection, the

disciples have already heard the crazy-sounding stories of Mary Magdalene and the other women, that they have found Jesus' tomb empty, and have seen him walking around. Then he appears, suddenly, in their midst.

The doors are locked, says John, and he makes no mention of anyone opening them. He just says, matter-of-factly, "Jesus came and stood among them."

His first word to them is "Peace be with you." In the Hebrew, that would be *Shalom*, the standard greeting. It might as well have been, "Hi, how ya doin'" — although I think John is well aware of the deep meaning of the word *shalom*, or peace, and how much those confused and troubled souls need to hear it.

Surely there are many things Jesus says to them, many answers to their questions. There's laughter, and tears, and hugs — as that little community starts to sort out in their minds what an incredible thing has just happened.

First, though, there was the little matter of checking credentials. No one back then carried an ID card. But Jesus hardly needed one. His own body was all the evidence they needed: especially the scars caused by nails and spear. John says simply: "He showed them his hands and his side."

It was as though he pulled out an official-looking piece of paper, with raised seal and the signature of the county clerk, and said, "You want to know who I am? Here's a copy of my death certificate."

Last time I checked, a death certificate is not on the list of approved forms of ID accepted by the New Jersey DMV, under their 6-point identity-verification system. Can you imagine if somebody showed up to renew their driver's license, and said, "Sorry, I don't have a passport, or a utility bill with my address on it, but here's my death certificate."

Can you imagine?

That's what Jesus is showing them, as he displays the wounds in his hands and side. But this is the resurrection, and no stranger, paradigm-busting thing has happened in human history, before or since, so you've got to make up the documentation as you go along. They all gather around, and touch his wounds, even stick their fingers into the open gash in his side, marveling at these things they're seeing. A person with such wounds, who was flogged to within an inch of his life then hung upon a cross, has no business being anywhere except laid out stone-cold dead in a tomb — but here he is!

Yes, there *are* many things Jesus says to the disciples, and they to him, but John records only the core pronouncements. Among the most important are these words: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Wherever Jesus has traveled from to be there — and remember, this is a journey from death to life, so God

knows (literally, *only* God knows) where he's been — Jesus is sending them out on their own epic journey. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Who knows? Maybe even as far as India!

Then, the Gospel record says, he breathes upon them, saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” You know the familiar story of Pentecost from the Acts of the Apostles. Some have called this verse “John’s Pentecost.” “Spirit,” *pneuma* in the Greek, literally means “breath,” so it’s like the risen Jesus is walking around the world breathing, only the air he’s breathing is not a mix of oxygen and carbon dioxide, it’s pure Holy Spirit. And he’s now sharing that divine breath with them.

They’re going to need it, because of what he tells them to do next. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

These disciples of Jesus are being given the Godlike authority to forgive sins. They will serve as God’s licensed representatives here on earth, official holders of the forgiveness franchise — and you’d better believe that, if they’re going to undertake something like that, they’d *better* inhale deeply of that Holy Spirit-breath. Yes, they *are* going to need it!

This is the scene that's just taken place, as Thomas arrives back at the house. He just went out to pick up the lunch order, that's all. He was only gone a few minutes. But, a lot can happen in a few minutes, if the power of resurrection is behind it. When his fellow disciples explain to him what they've just heard and seen, Thomas just stands there, slack-jawed in astonishment. He lets those bags of Jerusalem Mike's Subs he's been holding fall to the floor. *What* has he missed?

Now, this is where the adjective "doubting" is so unfair, when applied to Thomas. A week later, when Jesus shows up again — just as unexpectedly — there's absolutely nothing Thomas demands Jesus do for him, other than the very same things he's already done for the others. *Of course* he's got to see and touch the wounds: that's no different than what his friends got to do, a week before. We don't speak of "Doubting Peter" or "Doubting John," but they were no different from Thomas. They just had a week's head start on viewing the evidence, that's all.

Until each one of them has the chance to touch his wounds, they're all doubters!

Here's something else Thomas does in this passage that proves he doesn't deserve the adjective, "Doubting." When Jesus does show him his wounds, saying, "Do not doubt, but believe," Thomas' immediate reaction is to declare, "My Lord and my God!"

It's the first time anyone says that of Jesus, in John's Gospel – and it's Thomas who says it: Believing Thomas!

As for you and me, we don't have the advantage of seeing and hearing and touching him. We fall within the compass of Jesus' words from verse 29: "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe!"

You know how John's Gospel begins, with that wonderful, poetic, mystical Prologue, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"? "Word," of course – *logos* – refers to Jesus. What John's been hinting at all along, he now reveals here, at the end of his book: and it's in the words of none other than Thomas that he reveals it! Thomas completes the promise John lays out in the Prologue: "My Lord and my God!" Once Thomas grasps that essential truth, it launches him on his career as an evangelist with such momentum, it's no wonder he makes it all the way to India!

Yet before he makes that confession, Thomas has a few conditions that have to be met. "Unless I, too, touch the nail-marks, unless I, too, place my fingers in the spear-wound, I will not believe."

Most of us would affirm that these are reasonable conditions. They're fully understandable, in light of the scientific laws that govern the universe. A body at

rest tends to stay at rest. A body in motion tends to stay in motion. But a body laid out on a stone slab in a tomb is just dead.

Jesus graciously fulfills Thomas' conditions, inviting him to touch his wounds. You could say his surrender to the truth of the resurrection is conditional.

Not so for us. Our only path to an Easter faith is by means of unconditional surrender. That's because we do fall within the purview of John's words: "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

The great Christian poet, John Donne, expresses that understanding in these famous lines, from a risky and powerful poem depicting God as a fearsome adversary:

**Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend
Your force, to breake, blow, burn and make me new.**

[Holy Sonnet XIV]

It's a fundamental truth that you or I can never come to faith without first going through a kind of surrender. It's simply not possible to try faith out, provisionally, on a trial basis. It's got to be all or nothing, or it isn't faith. You can't just stick your big toe in the water. You've got to jump in with both feet.

Lots of people try a limited commitment. They've said, "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, I'm yours — except for that excessive drinking habit; except for

the way I treat my customers; except for the way I spend my money; except for...

(You fill in the blank.)

To be a Christian, we've got to give up that proclivity of ours to always be in control. We've got to turn our lives over to Jesus Christ, allowing him to reign in our hearts as Lord and Master.

To do that is scary and difficult. But it's the only way.

At the end of the day, it's what Thomas does. He surrenders — unconditionally. He declares: "My Lord and my God!" May that be our confession as well, today and every day of our lives!

Let us pray:

**Lord Jesus,
we wish we could reach out and touch you,
but we cannot.
And so we invite you
to reach out and touch us instead.
Touch us in our inmost hearts:
those parts of us where we are vulnerable,
ashamed or afraid.
Touch us and heal us, deep within.
Give to us the gift of faith:
that we too may build our lives
on this good news of resurrection!**

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