Doughty Thomas

Sermon preached by The Rev. Jenny Reece at St. Brendan's Episcopal Church, Deer Isle, Maine, on April 11, 2021

Jesus said to his disciples "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Let us Pray: *Come holy spirit, come holy trinity, in the midst of our faith and doubt make known your presence with us as we, with the first disciples long ago, receive the word of Peace from our Risen Lord. Peace is what we crave—peace in our world, peace in our nation, peace in our homes, peace in our hearts. Help us know the peace that does not keep us quiet and sleepy but wakes us and gives wings to our feet as we boldly walk the way on which you send us, the Way of Love. And so may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

I heard this story recently: A very holy man died and met his maker in heaven. "O Lord God!" Said the holy man, "I spent my life worshiping you and honoring you. I was filled with compassion for the suffering of the world and I spent my life in prayer. I spent my life beseeching you to send help so that poverty, violence and injustice would be defeated. Why did you never answer my prayers? Why did you never send help?" "Oh," said the Lord God, laughing (the Lord God has a good laugh at us a lot I think) "I answered your prayers all right! You asked me to send help to the world. I did sent help. I sent you.

As the Father sent me, says Jesus, *so I send you.*

Each Second Sunday of Easter we are met again with this special passage from John about how the grieving disciples of Jesus met the Risen Lord. At the time, they were, this gospel tells us, hiding away in fear, terrified that either the religious authorities or the Roman soldiers, or the two joining forces, would hunt them down as supporters of an insurrectionist and blasphemer. But Jesus whom they had seen dying horribly on the cross, their beloved friend and master, came walking through their locked doors and their walls as if they were just not there. Shalom, he said. The usual greeting of the time. It's almost as if he nonchalantly appeared their midst saying, Hi there! But at the same time the word for hello and goodbye, is a profound word: Shalom. It means a deep and holistic peace. When you arrive you bring this peace, and when you go, you go in peace. Jesus breathes his holy peace on the disciples, and they will never again be the same craven, lost, and despairing people. They will completely transform their own community, as we read in Acts. They will live out the promise of the Psalm of the blessed life when all people know they are brothers and sisters, anointed with the oil of

priesthood in the name of Jesus, living as the beloved community of equals. And they will go out from there and change the world.

But all the disciples of Jesus were not there to meet the Risen Lord. Thomas was missing. Thomas, who was so close to Jesus he was called his Twin. He did not arrive until after Jesus had left the room, and you can imagine his disappointment that he had not seen what they had seen. And it is not surprising that he did not believe the tale the others told him. He refused to believe this Dead Man Walking sort of story unless he could see with his own eyes and feel with his own hands the risen body of his lord. From that moment we have called him Doubting Thomas.

Now, the name Doubting Thomas is not fair. For one thing, none of the men disciples at first believed the story the women told of their journey to the tomb in the garden and their extraordinary news of the stone that had been rolled away, and the empty tomb, the grave linens cast aside and angels saying He is not here, he is risen. They were all doubters. We shouldn't single Thomas out for being some kind of special skeptic. Instead of doubting Thomas, I call him Doughty Thomas. Doughty is a good old fashioned Scottish word. It means brave and strong. "steadfastly courageous . . . valiant."

Not doubting Thomas, but doughty Thomas, brave Thomas, valiant Thomas. What? You say, this skeptic who needs to plunge his hands right into the wounds of Jesus before he will believe he who has died, is risen? How is this brave?

But have you ever asked yourself why Thomas is not in the room with the others, when Jesus comes bursting through the locked door? The other disciples are hunkered down, hiding, terrified of exposing themselves to the dangers of the outside world where both the Roman Empire and the religious Authorities are hell-bent on suppressing them and their upsetting, rabble rousing, Jesus movement.

They don't dare go outside. They have locked their doors. Only Thomas is brave enough to get out there beyond the sanctuary of their building into the street. He hasn't gone out just to buy bagels. He's out there because that's where Jesus did his ministry, out there with the blind beggars and the tax collectors and the fallen women, not safe in their little community of like-minded pious armchair revolutionaries. Alone of them all, Thomas is out there in the place of danger and confusion. Brave Thomas, Doughty Thomas.

And then I think he was very brave to say what possibly others were thinking. When everyone else was chattering about what the women had or hadn't seen, and about what they had since experienced, he was brave enough to stand against them all and express his doubts. He was courageous enough not to run away but to stay there with them, despite his skepticism. He was filled with doubts and yet he

waited around another whole week, in the midst of his unbelief, not crediting his friends' reports of seeing Jesus risen, but waiting to see Jesus himself. He was full of doubt, and he didn't trust his friends. But he trusted Jesus. Brave Thomas, doughty Thomas.

Let's think about Thomas as he appears in other places in the gospels. We don't hear too much about him, as it turns out. It's Peter who calls Jesus the Messiah, and then refuses to believe what Jesus says about what that means, so that Jesus has to say, Get thee behind me, Satan. It is James and John who dream of sitting with Jesus in his glory, one on each side, and do not want to hear what that glory will cost. But it is Thomas, when Lazarus dies, and the other disciples tell Jesus that going to Bethany is too dangerous, who says 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' Brave Thomas. Doughty Thomas. Of all the disciples, it seems, he gets it. To be Jesus is to turn your face unerringly to the cross. To be a follower of Jesus, is to go with him to that place of brokenness and wounds and death. Thomas trusts Jesus and has the courage to wait to see him.

He wants to put his fingers in the wounds. He wants to really see and feel the suffering of Jesus. It takes courage to be with someone in their pain, in their trauma. And Jesus in his risen body challenges those who love him to see his suffering, which is the suffering of the whole world, and not to turn away from it. To put their fingers in it, as it were. You see I find it so interesting and so amazing that the resurrected body of Jesus still has holes in it. You'd think in the resurrection the human body would be made perfect, whole, renewed in all ways. But Jesus comes to us with all his wounds open. The Resurrection displays to us once and for all the vulnerability of Love. Love is wounded, even in heaven.

The empty space of the tomb we were left with last week returns this week in the empty places in the resurrected body of Jesus. A place that invites us in, invites us not to cower in a corner but to face pain, to face death, to walk into the open place and find the new life that waits for us. If we dare.

And if legend has it right, this Thomas the twin was indeed doughty. He was not there when Jesus first said "As my father sent me, I send you." But he sure acted as if he had heard those words. He dared to take the message of Jesus and his way of love, far away into foreign lands, years before that later apostle Paul made his missionary trips that spread the good news all around the Mediterranean Sea. No, Thomas left all the territories of the Roman world behind him completely and made his way east and south into the subcontinent of India itself. To this day in the Southern Indian state of Kerala there are Christians who call themselves Ma Thoma with an ancestry in the faith they claim goes all the way

back to this same courageous and doughty Thomas. He had not been there to hear Jesus say "So I send you." But he went anyway. Brave Thomas. Trusting Thomas.

So thanks be to God for sending Doughty Thomas to remind us that we can be doubters and darers as we follow Jesus to the cross, to the tomb, and to a new life, wounds and all. Like him we do not know where God will send us. But we can trust that God will be with us every step of the way.

We don't know what the church will look like as we emerge from the suffering of the year of Covid. The pandemic has yet to be eradicated, and we must boldly and courageously imagine new ways to be the church in this changed world.

We don't know what the world will look like in ten or twenty years. We must trust Jesus to guide us into being courageous leaders in the creation of a truly beloved community such as the Psalmist envisioned and the first community of believers tried to put into practice: a community of equality, where there is no violence, no struggle for dominance, no exclusion because of race or gender or anything else. A community of love and justice. We can do it if we are doughty Christians like Thomas.

We must trust Jesus like him to guide us into being courageous leaders in the preservation and renewal of the natural world God has set us in to keep and to nurture. We haven't done a good job of that and it will take all our doughtiness, all our valiant courage to right what has been done wrong. We have taken a small step in the Diocese of Maine of forming a Climate Justice Council, on which both Elaine and I sit, and we commend to you our work and ask for your prayers as we seek to be advocates for the care of God's creation in Maine.

These things take courage. But you are doughty Christians like Thomas. You may believe or you may be skeptical, but if you trust Jesus you will have all the bravery you need to go on the road he is sending you on. And believe me, God has answered our prayers to send help.

He has sent you. And You. And You. And you. And me. As we go forward on the road he shows us, we will share our doubts and our faith, our burdens, our grief, our hope, and our joy, as we turn together to Jesus saying *My Lord and my God*! So may it be, Amen