

April 3 –

Sermon: Unless

Scripture: John 20:19-31

“Unless” is the word of doubt. Thomas spoke it upon hearing from the others about their encounter with the risen Lord. “Unless I can see and touch the marks of crucifixion I will not believe.” How many times have we used the word “unless” or one of its synonyms to express our doubts? I know I haven’t been feeling well but until the tests come back I am going to think positively. Unless I hear them say.....I won’t believe it. Doubt, questions, uncertainty are a part of life and faith. Because of this exchange between Thomas and Jesus we feel uncomfortable about having those doubts. Today I want us to embrace and celebrate a healthy doubt.

We need to begin by not being too hard on Thomas. Think of what he was asked to believe. Thomas had witnessed or at least heard about Jesus’ crucifixion. There had been no doubt that Jesus was dead. In John we have Mary Magdalene encountering the Risen Christ and then going back to tell the disciples. What she said is; “I have seen the Lord!” What does that mean? It could have been open to interpretation and some might have thought she had had a vision, had a dream or something else. Also, the gospel account goes on to say that later that same day Jesus appeared to the disciples and Thomas was not there. Since Thomas was not present in the evening he might have been absent when Mary first shared the news. There is at least some probability that Thomas left the rest of the disciples, for whatever reason, sometime on Saturday. This would mean that he goes from images of the crucifixion to hearing them all talking about how Jesus was alive. Is it any wonder that he doubted? It would be hard for any of us to make that mental leap, at least immediately. Even if he had heard Mary, he had not seen Jesus alive. His doubt statement was asking for no more than what the others had already received; a personal encounter with the risen Christ. Now, having at least redeemed Thomas a bit, let us look at our doubts through the word “unless.”

“Unless” acknowledges our doubts. Think about Thomas. It would have been easier for him to just go with the flow. All these people whom he had come to appreciate were saying they had seen the risen Lord, why not just say, “Great, Jesus is alive” and

hide any doubts you might have. By expressing his doubts, Thomas knew he was going to be in for a hard time from the others. They might be angry that he doesn't believe them. They might have decided that it was their job to convince him. They might have just been scornful. They were experiencing something awesome and Thomas was trying to pour cold water on it. It takes courage to speak out our "Unless." Usually we just hide it. But when we acknowledge our doubts, as Thomas did, then there is the possibility for something good to come from it.

"Unless" for Thomas also stands for the need for something solid to stand on, to base our beliefs. We all need this in some fashion. It might not be in as dramatic a way as Thomas, but we need a foundation. For some in faith it is the Bible. They have to believe it is the literal, inspired unchanging word of God. Everything must be based on this foundation or else. Others see the Bible as a dramatic encounter with the living God and we are to engage its words for our place and time. Others build their foundation on Christian community or love. Their faith is relational and they need it and seek it. When it is lacking they will say, "unless things change..." Denominational identity, "we've always been," devotional time, community involvement and more are the solid foundations people need for their faith. They will say, "unless..." If it is not present they can't support, embrace, or accept that group's interpretation of faith. So ask yourself, "What do I need foundationally?" Without it I would have a hard time being faithful. Thomas needed something and expressed doubts about what he heard until he found that support. It is not a bad model for all of us. It is certainly better than saying nothing and then just fading away.

"Unless," as Thomas shares it, leaves open the possibility that what was being said was true. Think about how much more positive these words of doubt are than words such as, "you're wrong. Jesus is dead, I know!" Thomas allowed that what they were saying might be true. He was also admitting that the gap he had to step over to get from where he was to where they were was just too big to do on his own. Honest doubt means you grant the other the possibility they might be right. It also means you are admitting that where you are might be wrong or at least subject to re-investigation. Doubt of this kind is a flexible doubt. It admits that everything is in flux and you are not

ready to make a firm decision, at least not yet. We need more of this kind of doubt than the “I’m right, you’re wrong” that seems to dominate much of faith and politics. So, I hope you can embrace your doubts and see where they are positive, and help you to grow in your faith.

Now, let us look at Jesus’ response to Thomas. It says some very important things about how God views our doubts and questions. First of all, God meets us in our doubts. Jesus could have rejected Thomas for his doubts. Instead he engages Thomas where he is, to move him to a better place. This is a reminder to us as well. When we have open healthy doubts, God does not reject us, but instead meets us to move us.

I have had many a conversation with people who come sharing their doubts about something they read in the Bible, or they heard about Christianity, or the church’s stand on an issue. They often come either combative or embarrassed. When I acknowledge their doubts, without defense, asking why they are here to see me, it often allows the conversation to open up.

Secondly, Jesus provides that foundation Thomas needed. Jesus says, “Here are my wounds, see and touch. Don’t doubt but believe.” The proof Thomas wanted, he received. When we approach our doubts with openness, admitting to needing some foundational pieces, we will often find them. I recall visiting with a man who was struggling about an issue. I forget now just what hot button topic we were dealing with. He felt a certain way and read in the Bible passages confirming his opinions. He then came to worship and heard something else. He came to see me with doubts. How could I be preaching words contrary to the Bible? I then showed him other scripture passages that challenged his ideas. He was surprised to see that the Bible sometimes says very different things at different places. He was really filled with doubt for a moment. His foundation of Bible alone cracked beneath him. We then talked more about reading the Bible in context. Stepping back to see the big picture and how any one verse could be twisted. This new understanding caused him to get excited. It didn’t change him immediately on this particular issue, but he felt free to admit he had lots of questions that he had just been bottling up. He began to read the Bible differently and it was life giving.

Ultimately, God challenges us to move forward in faith after our doubts have been confronted. Doubts can be used to keep from changing. We can put up all sorts of “unless” tests not because we want to grow or to figure it out, but to block change. We are always reminded that we are to be open to the Spirit of God and move forward, as far as we can in faith, and then, with our doubts, admit them with openness saying we will shift and change if we can get them answered. This was Thomas. He was willing to believe, he just needed some help. Sometimes we need that help. We have to try something in faith not knowing if it will work, but already agreeing to embrace the new if it does.

Thomas is the first to proclaim Jesus as divine! He says “My Lord and My God” He gets beyond doubts to faith quicker than all the rest. Later he is known as the Apostle to the east. It is said that he traveled as far as India with the good news of Jesus. Admitting to having those “unless” feelings in a way that allows us to ultimately move forward in faith is a good thing. It is part of our growth in life and actions. So embrace your feelings of “unless” and see what God can do to move you forward.