

"THE LAST BEATITUDE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION Our text for this morning is the story of Thomas, the doubter. His story is there for you and for me. It's a story for the Sunday after Easter. Like us, Thomas missed the Easter resurrection; he wasn't there. There's no explanation given as to why he was absent. He just wasn't there, just as you and I and all in Church since the time of Thomas were not there. We were not "eye witnesses" to the event of the resurrection.

DEVELOPMENT When Thomas heard about the resurrection and the appearance of Jesus to the disciples, he said, "Look...I don't believe it." And furthermore, he said, "And I won't believe it until I see in His hands the print of the nails, until I place my finger in the mark of those nails, until I place my hand in His side".

And so the next Sunday night, one week later, the disciples gathered together. Jesus appears to them again and this time Thomas is there with them. It's a strange scene. Jesus walks right through a closed door and comes before Thomas. He singles Thomas out. The other disciples are there, but they play no part in this scene. Jesus zeroes in on Thomas and all those who think that faith has to do with absolute certainty, or with irrefutable proofs, or infallible evidence, or incontrovertible fact, or scientific evidence. He gives Thomas a lesson in what constitutes real faith. He invites Thomas to make an empirical test, a scientific experiment. "Touch me" he says. "If that's what you want to do, then go ahead - touch me. If your faith is so weak, Thomas, that you need some sense data in order to bolster it, then touch me."

"But after you have done that, Thomas, how can you be sure that your senses weren't playing tricks on you? You know if you want to doubt, you're going to doubt. You'll say, 'Maybe I was just seeing things. Maybe I just wanted to see and to touch the wounds so much that I imagined I touched and saw them'. So if you are determined to doubt, you see, there's no end to the possibilities. You can even doubt your own existence...doubt almost anything. But if you want scientific evidence for your faith, then go ahead - touch Me."

It was something like that that Jesus said to Thomas. And the point that He was making is that seeing Him is not believing in Him. Seeing Him gives no advantage. Even if you have seen, you must still believe and that involves risk and some courage. You still have to act on what you have seen. And that dear friend is what constitutes faith. That's the point of this text, this story. There's no advantage in having seen.

AN IMPORTANT PART Then comes the most important part of the story, a part that is sometimes overlooked. The point of the story is that Thomas did not accept the invitation to put his fingers into the wounds to test their reality. He didn't do it. He had the opportunity to do it and he didn't do it. A few days before this he was demanding the chance to do it, and now the opportunity is his, but he declines. He declines because faith is not a matter of infallible signs and absolute proof. Faith is always a matter of trust and so instead of testing the claim he confesses the creed of the Church, as do you and I, and he says, "My Lord and MY God." And the story ends with Jesus bringing the point home with what is called the Last Beatitude. "Blessed are those who believe without having seen". That is you and me. Thomas is there for you and for me.

"Blessed are those who believe without having seen". Let's think about it.

A MODEL FOR THINKING PEOPLE

Thomas is also a marvelous model for thinking people, those for whom doubt is not a sin, but a way of getting to the truth. Thomas is there for you. The fact that this story is featured so prominently is the evidence that there were many in the early Church who were like him. They were there in Church for the same reason that he was in that room. Not because they believed, but because they wanted to believe. They were searchers; they were seekers; they were doubters and they were questioners. They were not unlike many people in our churches today.

And we know that they were there because the worship of the early Church was structured to accomodate them. The first part of the worship was prayers and psalms, scriptures and sermon. And the seekers were there with the believers. The second part of the service was holy communion, and the seekers were asked to leave because holy communion was only for the true believers. The collection, incidentally, took place in the first part of the service. And also in the first part of the service the Scriptures were read, and probably always on the Sunday after the celebration of Easter this story of Thomas and his doubt was included to help the seekers see what faith was all about. It helped them to see that there is a difference between faith and certainty, that faith always has the possibility of doubt, and therefore in a religion of faith the doubters are never to be excluded. That's why Thomas is there.

There are those who think otherwise in our time, who think that honest intellectual questioning in religion is a form of sin. Their model of what it means to be religious is not the apostles. Curiously enough, it's the Pharisees, at least as they are portrayed in the New Testament. The Pharisees believed that they had all they needed to know about God and the human condition as it was set down in the Law. So that if anyone ever asked a question they always had an answer. They were not unlike those people in our time who go around ringing the doorbells and embarrassing us because we can't answer their questions about the Bible. The Pharisees are their model; they have chapter and verse for everything. They make us feel uncomfortable as they quote it.

Remember that the Pharisees had something like 620 laws that were supposed to cover every area of human life. In addition they had the canonical books of the Prophecy, the tradition of the elders, and if all else failed, they had the writings of the scribes all in black and white. So if you ever had a question all they had to do was look it up, give you the answer. In such a tight system there is no room for doubt, nor is there any need to doubt. In such a religion doubting is always something of a sin. And one of the ironies of history is that Christianity which began with the announcement that we are liberated, set free from the Law, soon developed its own rigid system of doctrines, dogmas, and laws, and called doubt a sin and excluded Thomas and his spiritual offspring who believe rightfully, I think, that doubt is not a sin but a way of getting at the truth.

Thomas Carlyle tells of a country boy who was a guest at a formal dinner. In the course of the meal he got a large piece of hot potato in his mouth. And much to the embarrassment of all the dignified ladies and gentlemen present, he spit it out into his hand and put the potato back on the plate. Then he looked at the shocked expression on the faces of all the people present and said rather quietly, "You know..a fool would have swallowed that."

A religion that sets up a system of belief and says that you must swallow the whole thing or you are outside the means of grace, or you are not sufficiently Christian - that's not a religion of faith and I have trouble with that approach, that kind of religion. Faith is not certainty and therefore faith always includes doubt. Who was it who once said, "There's more faith in doubt than there is in all the creeds of Christendom."

WHAT THEN DOES FAITH GIVE US

If our faith cannot give us certainty then what does it give us? And for the answer to this question, let us turn to the Epistle Lesson for this morning, the First Letter of John.

This letter evidently accompanied the Gospel of John as it was circulated around the early Church. It was a kind of commentary or sermon, on the main themes of the Gospel of John, rather than a letter as we think of it. In the fifth chapter it described the person who lives by faith in the resurrection. It says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God". And then it defines the child of God as one "who overcomes the world". That phrase "overcoming the world" hearkens back to the 16th chapter of John's Gospel to what is called the Last Discourse where Jesus addresses His disciples for the last time before going to the crucifixion.

He says to them that He is leaving them for a while, a little while, "and then you will see Me". In other words, after the crucifixion He will be resurrected and return as the Comforter, the spirit - to comfort, to strengthen, to sustain them. "Then you will see me". And He concludes the discourse by saying,

"I have said this to you that in Me you may have peace.. In the world, you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world".

Commenting on that, First John says that faith gives you power to overcome the world. "This is the victory that overcomes the world - our faith". When Paul writes the Romans He puts it this way,

"We are more than conquerors through Him who loves us"

It's the same thing. Faith gives us the power to overcome the world.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Now what does that mean? I like to think that overcoming the world means having "equanimity". What a wonderful word that is! It comes trippingly off the tongue - equanimity. Equanimity means composure under tension. And that's the gift of faith. It means grace under pressure. That's the gift of faith, too. That's how you can tell if somebody believes in the resurrection and that God had the final word. Peace. Courage. Equanimity. Composure under tension. Grace under pressure.

They don't have all the answers, nor do they need all the answers. They need only one thing and that is the courage to trust that Jesus is resurrected. That's what gives them equanimity, composure to face whatever happens in this world and whatever comes upon them in their lives. "In this world" Jesus says, "You will have tribulation, but be of good cheer". This means - have courage. Look up. Hang in there. "Because I have overcome the world" - and all those who believe in Him have overcome it, too - with equanimity.

A SHORT STORY

I came across a short story recently about a girl who took piano lessons from Miss Caroline Walker. Miss Caroline, as everybody called her, took ten pupils every year, always girls. She was a legend in that town; they told stories about her.

Miss Caroline had two objects in mind in her teaching. One was to teach her girls to be ladies, so she instructed them as much in manners as she did in music. The other goal was to enable them to play their piece perfectly at the May recital. And she drilled them all year long on that one piece, including how to sit at the piano, and how to drape their long skirt elegantly around the bench, how to stand straight, and fold their hands in front of them and announce what they were going to play. "I am going to play such and such by so and so" and then describe what everybody was supposed to hear when they played this piece. "You will hear the tiny feet of deer splashing in a mountain stream" or "You will hear elves gliding through the mountain glen" - that kind of thing.

The night of the recital came. It was held in the high school auditorium as it always was. The ten girls were sitting nervously backstage waiting their turn. It came Ann Louise's turn. She was near fainting, she was so nervous. She had forgotten what she was going to say; she was sure that she would never, ever get through the piece. But now was her turn. She had to get up and walk over to the wings where Miss Caroline was waiting for her, tension mounting in her, facing her tribulation. Miss Caroline stood behind her, put her hands on Ann Louise's shoulders and whispered:

"You have worked hard and you know your piece, and you have nothing to fear. And remember, I am counting with you all the way."

And with a little shove she pushed Ann Louise out onto the stage in front of all those people...parents and everybody else's parents...and even brothers and sisters who had come. She launched into her, "I shall play for you..." speech without a bobble. Then she spread her skirt elegantly, as Miss Caroline had taught her, and sat down on the bench, sat before the keyboard. She then discovered she was much calmer than she thought she would be. She knew that Miss Caroline was in the wings and she remembered her last words to her, "I am counting with you all the way". And they were held together by something that went beyond either one of them alone, beyond the audience, and beyond the recital itself. Ann Louise realized now that this moment was what she had been preparing for all year long. The music now, at her command, came cascading out of the baby grand, into the darkened auditorium, full of life, full of joy, right on cue. Remember, "I'm counting with you all the way."

CONCLUSION

Dear friends in Christ. To have faith in the resurrection is to know that there is now one standing in the wings, counting with you all the way, saying, "You have nothing to fear. I have overcome the world". And that's why First John says, "This is the victory that overcomes the world". This means you can now face this life - full of joy, full of life, right on cue, knowing that "He is counting with you all the way!"

PRAYER O God, our Father, for that love that will never let us go, nor let us down, for that love that was revealed and released by the resurrection of of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, we give you our thanks.

Help us so to share in the quality of His life that we may also share in the triumph of his victory, remembering how He overcame the world. Help us always to have the faith that allows us to do the same. Now grant us the power and the grace to go out into our world and to live as though Christ were living in us, that our world may be raised to new levels of life and of joy.

In the name of the Risen Christ, we pray. Amen