

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH  
COBLESKILL, NEW YORK

April 11, 2010 – EASTER 2C

The Rev. Nina George Hacker

Sermon: "A Touch-y Faith"\*

Acts 5:12a, 17-22, 25-29 (The Apostles vow to obey God alone)  
Psalm 111 (Praise for the Lord's awesome and wonderful works)  
Revelation 1:1-8 (Christ is the Beginning and the End of all things)  
St. John 20:19-31 (Thomas questions Jesus' Resurrection)

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"You're real! You're really real!" Rick and I will exclaim, hugging each other ferociously just to make sure, when reunited after too long apart. What's going on here? Do we disbelieve the other's existence? Of course not. We're just expressing that what we've dreamed of and hoped for is actually happening. And touching one another provides welcome confirmation.

It's likely Jesus' disciples were in somewhat the same frame of mind, that first Easter evening. They had been waiting and worrying. As anxiously as one waits for the results of a biopsy, the auditor's report, or the bar exams ...<sup>1</sup> Earlier that day, they had heard a fantastic story of the resurrected Jesus from Mary Magdalene. They were excited. Thrilled. But also afraid. What could this *possibly* mean? Let's face it; in the ordinary course of human experience, dead people do not live again.<sup>2</sup> Then suddenly, out of nowhere, the risen Christ materializes among them!

The disciples, St. Luke records, were "startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." And so Jesus' first words to His quivering, freaked-out followers are, "Peace be with you."

Bible scholar Raymond Brown<sup>3</sup> points out that this is not the standard rabbinic Hebrew, "*shalom aleikum*." Rather, the speech pattern used here is more closely related to divine revelation in the Old Testament. For instance, in Judges 6:23, Gideon is frightened at seeing the angel of the Lord, so God says to him: "Peace to you; do not be afraid; you shall not die." Brown concludes<sup>4</sup> that in John 20:19, we are not dealing with an ordinary greeting. Jesus' words are not a wish, but a *statement of fact*. The risen Christ is *actually bringing peace* through His presence. Here is the dramatic fulfillment of Jesus' words spoken in the Last Discourse (JN 14:27-28): "... my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

Jesus is *alive!*—and is bringing His incomparable peace. Yet it seems the incredulous disciples still need further assurance. We're all familiar with the old adage, "seeing is believing." Evidently, Jesus understood this, because the evangelist records (v. 20) that Jesus "showed them his hands and side . . . then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." Like Thomas, what they needed to see were Jesus' wounded hands and side, powerful evidence that He was the same Jesus who had died on the cross three days before.

When I first became a believing Christian, I could not understand why God did not heal His beloved Son's horrible, gaping, bloody wounds. If this all-powerful Deity could change death into life, why not give Jesus a perfect body, too?

But you see, those marks—made by the nails brutally driven into Jesus' flesh to hold Him on the cross, and by the vicious thrust of a Roman sword to hasten His death—those are Jesus' *hallmarks*. If you examine a piece of fine silver or gold you will find on it some initials or an insignia engraved by the jeweler or manufacturer. These are called hallmarks,<sup>5</sup> from the days when dishes, utensils and jewelry were produced by members of a guild or union that met and worked in large halls. Hallmarks are etched or engraved into fine artifacts to communicate two things:

First, they show that the item is actually what it appears to be—that, in fact, it is made of pure metal, not mixed with other, cheaper, materials. A hallmark is a guarantee of quality and purity. Second, they indicate where the item comes from, and in some cases, who made it. For instance, in England, a leopard’s head indicates that a silver piece comes from London, while the hallmark of the Sheffield guild is a crown, and that of Birmingham is an anchor. The practice of hallmarking began in 1300 when King Edward passed a law that no precious metal could be sold without a guarantee of its purity marked upon it. The practice continues today, and, I believe, can help us to understand this chapter of St. John’s Gospel.

So far, ten of Jesus’ disciples have seen their risen Lord, believed, and received gifts from Him. But Thomas was not with the group, that first Easter evening. Where was he? Suggestions range far and wide: He was grieving so deeply that he preferred to be alone. He was braver than the rest and was the only one to venture forth for provisions or to find out what was happening in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> Or maybe he was so disgusted with the way the others had abandoned Jesus that he wanted no part of them. We don’t know. But what matters is that Thomas has missed the gifts that Jesus brought the others: Inner peace . . . the imparting of the Holy Spirit . . . and the gift of forgiveness.<sup>7</sup>

A week later, when his fellow disciples tell him, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas isn’t very nice to them. Stubbornly, he declares, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." For Thomas, those marks, those hallmarks, are his guarantee. Poor Thomas. He’s gotten a lot of bad press over the millennia, having been tagged as “Doubting Thomas.” But remember, at first, most of the other disciples did not believe Jesus had risen, either. Thomas is just being sensible.<sup>8</sup> He won’t believe in the resurrection until he, too, has some proof.

Many of us are more like Thomas than we want to think. We, too, want evidence before we accept as truth what others say, particularly when they tell us things that seem impossible.<sup>9</sup> But it’s worth remembering: ALL of the disciples needed to see Jesus’ body before they believed! In making this point, St. John is establishing a foundational Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body:

This is no apparition or a ghost. This Jesus is *physical!* This is really *Jesus* who was wounded for our sins. His nail-scarred body is proof that He endured *real* pain, *real* agony, *real* blood. And now, even though He is able to pass through locked doors, Jesus has flesh that Thomas can touch. Neither Christ’s dying nor His being raised to life was some sort of mystical trick. Rather, this is the Incarnation all over again! The Word made flesh! Jesus as truly God and truly man.

For most of us, that’s still a lot to believe. Thomas tends to get a bad rap, but how often do we doubt God’s good news, miracles, and power? Every believer occasionally has doubts, so we should not chastise Thomas for entertaining a few. Mistakenly, we think that faith is the ability to make ourselves “believe six impossible things before breakfast,” as Alice is urged to do in [Lewis Carroll’s classic] Alice in Wonderland.<sup>11</sup>

But, as Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner asserts, “if you never doubt the certainty of your position, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith, they liven things up and keep us from falling asleep.”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus accepts Thomas’s skepticism with compassion. He knows this disciple’s tendency to question. Earlier, in John 14:5, Thomas protested, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” And so it is that the risen Christ invites Thomas to reach out his finger and see. Touch and believe.

The text never says whether Thomas actually placed his hands in Jesus’ wounds, because as soon as he is invited to do so, Thomas responds with the most powerful confession of faith in all of the Gospels: “**My Lord and my God!**” (v. 28).

“Lord” and “God”—this is the first time Jesus has been called both, openly. In the post-resurrection appearances, Jesus had been hailed as “Lord” by Mary Magdalene, but it is Thomas who makes clear that one may now address Jesus in the same language with which Israel addressed God Almighty. Clearly, Thomas’s encounter with and belief in the risen Jesus has transformed and liberated him—as it should each and every one of us.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and author, once wrote: “A true encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, this is what happens not only to Thomas, but to all of the disciples, after Jesus breathes His Holy Spirit into them. He has a mission for them, and He knows this band of cowards holed up in fear and disbelief will never be able to carry out His work on earth without His power.

In each of the four Gospels, Jesus concludes His resurrection appearances with a missionary command: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them” (Matt. 28:19);

“Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15); “Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in My name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).

The conferring of Christ’s Spirit, mission, and authority will so empower this fearful, self-centered ragtag bunch that they will be transformed into the greatest force for salvation the world has ever known. Tradition holds that Saint Thomas went on to preach the Gospel in India, where he was martyred for converting the wife and son of King Misdai. To this day, the Mar Thoma church of India claims *believing* Thomas as their revered founder.<sup>14</sup>

The risen Jesus’ exhortation to Thomas is: “Do not be faithless, but believing.” Our Lord speaks these same words to us, two millennia later, because we are still Thomases. We cannot believe simply because someone else has experienced Jesus. We can’t believe our next-door neighbor’s faith. We can’t live on other people’s truth.<sup>15</sup> We need to have our own faith, our own experiences with the risen Christ, before, with Thomas, we can proclaim: “My Lord and my God!” Then, like Thomas and the rest of Jesus’ disciples, we must receive the Holy Spirit, God’s power to carry out His work until Jesus comes in final victory and glory.

This Eastertide, let us invite Christ’s resurrection power to fill each of us with all peace and joy in believing, that we may go into the world and witness boldly for Jesus with our words and actions.

AMEN.

<sup>\*</sup> Adapted from a sermon by Nina George Hacker 22 April 2001.

<sup>1</sup> Norman Seli, “Another Old John 20 Sermon,” PRCL-L@LISTSERV.LOUISVILLE.EDU 26 April 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Sensing, “Sermon Text on John 20,” PRCL-L@LISTSERV.LOUISVILLE.EDU 26 April 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Brown, “The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI,” *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 29A, p. 1021 (1970)

<sup>4</sup> Brown, p. 1035, *ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Adapt. Richard J. Fairchild, “Showing the Marks,” *Sermons.com*, 2000. Used with permission.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph McCaffrey, “Easter 2B Sermon”; Len Mills, “Doubting Thomas” remarks, < midrash@joinhands.com > 25 April 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Lindeman, “The Doubter,” PRCL-L@LISTSERV.LOUISVILLE.EDU 27 April 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Adapt., Sensing, *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> Fairchild, *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Lindeman, *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Qtd. by Michael Phillips in “Holy Hilarity Sunday”

<sup>12</sup> Qtd. by Patrick S. McCorkle, “One of My Favorite Sundays in the Lectionary” comments, < midrash@joinhands.com > 24 April 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Gerard Fuller, “Doubting Thomas,” PRCL-L@LISTSERV.LOUISVILLE.EDU 26 April 2000.

<sup>14</sup> McCaffrey, *ibid*.