



Too Good to Be True

TEXT
John 20:24-31

May 10, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We are in this series, “Faith That Is Not in Vain.” It was the apostle Paul who said, “Unless Christ has been raised from the dead, then our faith is in vain.” So we have been listening to different resurrection witnesses each week, and today we turn to Thomas, the patron saint of “I’m not so sure about that.”

I know it is Mother’s Day, and I don’t know if that is the best day to sit with Thomas. I know in many households, if there is a doubter, it’s not mom. I wonder if Thomas’ mother had been there, maybe this story would have been different.

They told him they had seen the risen Christ. This is an important moment for the church. This is the first time the church proclaims that Christ is raised. They said, “He is risen.” But instead of responding, “He is risen indeed,” Thomas couldn’t believe.

Their word wasn’t enough. Many students of Scripture give Thomas a hard time. Why didn’t he believe the word of the other disciples? They had been on this journey together.

One scholar even says Thomas’ doubt is an insult to the others.¹

But maybe there is something else to learn here. Maybe this text teaches us that word alone may not ever be enough. It wasn’t enough for Thomas.

We will baptize some babies today. Their moms and dads will make some promises. They will not promise that their children will be smart or athletic. They won’t even promise that their children will become Christian. But they do promise that their children will know that their parents are Christian. They promise that they will share their faith with their children.

Their children may learn to believe themselves, or they may not. But today is not about the promises the children make; it is about the promises their parents make. You make that same promise. You promise to be the church for the children. You will keep that promise, but it will take more than words. You will have to do more than tell them that Jesus is alive. You will have to show them.

If I understand it, that was part of Thomas’ problem. Thomas, the patron saint of questions: We need him. He

reminds us it really is OK to question. There is no question you are going to ask that is going to make God go away.

Jesus appeared to his followers, but Thomas was not with them. I don’t know why. Maybe he was running errands for the group. Or maybe he was just running, not sure they were a group anymore.

He returns and his friends tell him what happened. “We have seen him. Christ is alive. Death has been defeated. We have seen the Lord.”

Thomas, this man of skepticism, needs more than their word. “Unless I put my finger in the marks of the nails; unless I place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

We call him doubting Thomas, but that’s a little unfair. He’s not much different than anyone else. When the women told the disciples that an angel told them he was alive, they thought it an idle tale.

The travelers on the Emmaus Road talked with Jesus for hours; it was only in the breaking of bread that they recognized him.

Last week we heard from Mark. You have to get to Galilee. You have to be in the hard

work of ministry. It is there you will find him.

Mary thought he was the gardener. “Where have you taken him?” she asks. It is only when he calls her by name that she knows it’s Jesus.

Resurrection doesn’t come to anyone quickly. No one seems to get it immediately. Thomas gets something of a bad rap. He’s not much more of a doubter than anyone else.

John says he tells us the stories of Jesus so that we might believe. Belief is something that is both strong and fragile. Faith is something that orients us on the journey; faith carries us through the storm; faith imagines our best self into life; but faith also comes with questions, with doubts, with skepticism. It has to.

I say faith has to come with questions and doubt because faith is not in something simplistic. Christian faith is the ultimate hope that life can be good, that people can be changed, that the worst moment in our lives will not define us. Christian faith is, at the end of the day, the conviction that the love of God is stronger than anything — even stronger than death.

Thomas may be the doubting one; but if he is, it is because the good news is almost too good to believe. At least Thomas knows what he needs. “Unless I put my finger in the nail prints; unless I place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

So Jesus shows up and offers just that. “Here, Thomas. It’s me. Put your fingers here.” But Thomas no longer needs

it. It’s funny. He seemed so certain of what he needed. But when Jesus comes to him, all of his demands seem to crumble. Rather than finger the evidence, Thomas simply confesses: “My Lord and my God!” There is no record that Thomas touched the hands of Jesus.

It’s here that we understand the particularity of Thomas’ doubt. He doesn’t doubt that God can bring life from death. That’s not the core of his skepticism. Some may doubt that, I understand.

Creation says God brings life from nothing, so I suppose if God can bring life from nothing, God can bring life from death. It’s not that different. We have seen that before. But resurrection isn’t really a matter of God’s power. Resurrection is a love story. The ultimate question of resurrection is: Will God hold on to us? That’s what is so hard to believe; almost too good to be true.

Does God’s love know your name? That is why resurrection can seem too good to be true.

In a strange way, I understood a little of this the day Terry Anderson was released. Anderson was the Associated Press journalist who was taken hostage in the Middle East in 1985.² He was later released after almost seven years of captivity. When he was released, reporters gathered around him and were filled with questions: Did he know the details of his release? Had he seen other hostages? Did he know why he was taken? Had he been mistreated? The questions went on and on.

What struck me was how different the press conference was from another moment. That moment was when Terry first stepped off the airplane — in Germany, I think it was — and running across the tarmac was Peggy Say. She was Terry Anderson’s sister, who was constantly pleading his case, knocking on the door at the White House and the State Department and in the media; traveling to Iran; traveling to the Middle East.

When he stepped off the plane, she ran to him and threw her arms around him. Now I am sure that she wanted to know if he had been mistreated and how his release finally was secured. I am sure she wanted to know why he was chosen and what he had to eat. But I am equally sure that all of these questions fade behind one truth: He came back!

For her, this was not a current event. It was not news. It was not a foreign policy question. For Peggy Say, love was at stake. And when love is claimed, the other questions are secondary.

For Thomas and for all of us, resurrection is the ultimate question of God’s love. When God so loves the world that he sends his Son, he sends Jesus into the world to reveal God’s love. And when the response of humanity is to seek his destruction, it may seem too good to be true to trust that Jesus will come back. But he does. Nothing can keep him away. Resurrection, the return of Jesus to this world after his crucifixion, is the greatest testimony to his love.

So why didn't Thomas believe them? They told him, "We have seen the Lord." The truth is, love like this usually needs more than words. Words are important.

For those of us who are fortunate — I count myself among them — our moms told us that they loved us. But today, when we call her or send her flowers or just offer a prayer of thanksgiving because she is already with Jesus; today, when we take her to lunch or prepare her breakfast in bed or do whatever it is we do to celebrate mom, we are remembering not just that she told us she loved us, as important as those words are. But we give thanks for the ways she showed love: the times she listened; the countless times she washed your clothes and set your place at the table; the times she drove carpool and cared for you when you were sick; the times she gave you space when all you could say is "Mom!!!" At the same time, she would say, "Tell me where you are; I'll be right there," when all we could say was "Mom!!!"

Love takes more than words, is what I am saying. We all need those people in our lives: those people who love us when we need it most; those people who befriend us, or sit with us in the dark night, or listen to us or tell us what we need to hear.

This gospel is hard to trust because the news, quite frankly, is almost too good to be true.

So I imagine God has put some people in your life — some people who have loved you in a way that makes you

trust that the love of God is real. And if you are fortunate, your mom is on that list. But it's a list, right? So today is a good day to give thanks for moms and all the others who God has placed in your life who make it possible to trust God's love for you.

¹Nancy Claire Pittman. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide* (2009), p. 397

²Terry Anderson's story is told in his book *Den of Lions* (1993).

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.