



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“MANY OTHER SIGNS”

Scripture Lessons: 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

*This sermon was preached by Dr. James Rogers on Sunday, April 11, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

It's that time of year again! The brightly colored Easter eggs have all been found - well, most of them hopefully. An excellent sermon on the Resurrection has been preached. "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" has been sung. The pews of First (Scots) have been filled as safely as possible. Visiting family members and friends have left town. Travelers have returned home to Charleston. And now it's time for "Low Sunday." You know about "Low Sunday" right? Debra Rienstra describes it this way: "that anticlimactic day when the entire church staff, having pulled out all the stops for Easter, drags back into the church in a state of exhaustion. The trumpets are back in their cases, the lilies are beginning to wilt, [and] the second stringers are in charge of leading worship."¹

The Gospel lectionary reading this morning comes from John's gospel and is a familiar story to many. So familiar, in fact, that we have given it an unofficial name: the story of Doubting Thomas. Poor Thomas! We certainly have not been very nice to him over the years. We have trouble even saying his name without including the word "doubting." Even our use of the word "doubting" always seems to involve a condescending tone: "Doubting Thomas." Makes me wonder why my parents named me James *Thomas* Rogers. It's unfortunate that Thomas has been given a label that seems to hijack this section of Scripture. We do not call Peter "Denying Peter" or Mark "Ran Away Naked Mark."

We often give Thomas a hard time, but in reality, none of the disciples in today's Gospel lesson are winning any awards. John tells us that on the first Easter the disciples heard Mary's testimony that she has "seen the Lord," yet they do not seem to believe her and have gathered together in a house and locked the doors. But given the events of the past week, who could blame them? Jesus had been arrested, crucified, and died. Would the authorities come for the disciples next? We can imagine the depth of their fear, sadness, anger, confusion, and loss.

We too have felt those emotions following the death of a loved one, the sudden loss of a job, a divorce in our family, the friendship that was broken, or a debilitating diagnosis. We can relate to these disciples for we too have had times when our future is uncertain, our faith is tested, and all hope seems to be lost. It does not take a pandemic with a highly contagious and deadly virus for us to lock our doors, isolate ourselves, and cower in fear. No, for our lives sometimes include moments of fear and despair.

But on that first Easter evening, in the midst of the fear and sadness, Jesus shows up and shows his hands and side. Twice he tells the disciples, "Peace be with you." And the Bible says, "the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." Can you imagine the rejoicing in that room and the

¹ Rienstra, Debra, "Second Sunday of Easter: Lesson and the Arts," *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. XIX, No. 2, February/March 2008, p. 74.

overwhelming exuberance that was felt? Do you think that someone started playing a trumpet? Did they all start singing the “Hallelujah Chorus” like our choir did last Sunday? Then Jesus commissions them for ministry and then breathes on them the Holy Spirit. It was the perfect Easter Sunday.

There was just one problem: Thomas was not there when Jesus appeared. Maybe he was sick. Maybe he was hiding somewhere else. Maybe he was playing golf. We do not know. But we do know that he missed out on seeing Jesus and was not ready to believe. He tells the others, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” This is a problem! Actually, it’s not. One week later, the disciples gather together again in the house and Thomas is with them. And Jesus shows up and shows Thomas exactly what he needs to believe.

While we might call this the story of Doubting Thomas, the reality is this is not so much a story about a “doubting” Thomas or a group of disciples who do not believe Mary’s testimony on that first Easter day. Instead, it’s a story about a God who raised his Son from the dead and a Jesus who goes to great lengths to offer peace and faith to fearful and even doubtful disciples.

Like those first disciples, in the midst of the fear and confusion and pain of our lives, we would like to see Jesus face to face, touch his hands and side, to see his risen body, feel his breath, and hear his voice offering us his peace. We are not so much unlike that two-year-old, at kindergarten chapel this week who told her teacher, “I want to see God.” And while we may not be able to see Jesus face to face, in the flesh, we can take comfort, for today’s Gospel story, is a story of a God who comes to disciples, wherever they may be. Over the past week, what a blessing it has been to share and hear stories of Jesus’ presence and peace in our lives with you all.

- After Charles Jordan’s mother passed away, on certain Sundays he would arrive an hour early to worship and sit quietly in the balcony before others would enter the sanctuary. The peace and comfort he found in the sanctuary on those Sunday mornings was something he was simply not able to find anywhere else and it helped him feel God’s presence and support during a difficult time.
- John Walden, who is now thirteen years old, felt God’s power three years ago while at Camp Bethelwoods. He wrote at the time a note which is still with his family today saying, “I was in God’s power to help me get through my mom and dad’s divorce.”
- When Betts Gatewood’s father died it left a hole in her family members’ hearts, but they felt God’s peace and love when they saw that his passport had expired on the very day he died.
- When my family lost a pregnancy a number of years ago, I remember feeling Jesus’ presence and peace every time our choir sang, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.”
- In 1989, Hurricane Hugo left a path of destruction through our beloved city of Charleston. What I have heard time and time again, are stories of Rev. Estes’ ministry in the weeks that followed, as she navigated debris and destruction to make pastoral visits at church members’ homes, being a visible reminder of Jesus’ presence, and the peace he promises to our hurting congregation.

When we share these stories, we join our voices with the writer of 1 John, and declare to one another, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. For the risen Jesus has been revealed to us too, and we have seen him and we testify to the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.

I can only imagine the pain that King David was feeling as he penned the words to Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And it must have been God’s presence and peace in King David’s life, God showing up in tough times, that led David to write the words of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” And later, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

As Christians, we believe in a Jesus that shows up in the midst of our lives. In the strong arms of a parent who holds us while we weep. In the words of a prayer offered on our behalf, at just the right time. In the warmth and beauty of a prayer shawl wrapped around our fingers or shoulders. In a hot meal, prepared with love. In a text message or phone call from someone who cares. In a handwritten card received in the mailbox. In the stories of Holy Scripture, testifying that Jesus is the Son of God, has been raised from the dead, and promises to be with us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I don’t know what you are going through right now. Maybe you are a youth who is enduring the isolation of your fourth quarantine. Maybe you are grieving the death of the spouse who was by your side for so many years. Maybe your family is navigating the pain of broken relationships and divorce. Maybe you are a high school senior who didn’t get accepted to the school you so desperately wanted to attend. Maybe you are a grandparent who hasn’t hugged your grandchild in the past year. Maybe you are a daughter who just wants to hear your father say, “I love you.” Maybe you just received that devastating diagnosis. Maybe you just failed to make the sports team you trained so hard to make. Maybe you want to be a parent, but are not sure how that will happen. Maybe your aging body is defying you. Maybe you are not sure if you believe.

I don’t know what you are going through right now. But I do know the story of that first Easter about a Jesus who comes again and again to scared and fearful and doubtful disciples offering himself, his peace, and exactly what they need for faith. No condemnation. Just grace. And I know that same Jesus offers himself again and again to disciples today, in the midst of our own worry and fear. For this is a Jesus who is greater than our fear. This is a Jesus who is greater than our doubt. This is a Jesus who is even greater than death. And he comes to us that we too might have his peace and come to believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, we may have life in his name.