

Proof or Faith¹

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
April 21, 2024
Text: John 20:19-31

Friday afternoon I spent a few hours doing something I had only dreamed about doing. I worked with my grandson in the garden of my daughter's beautiful home in Boston! This was a dream I feared would never become reality for any number of reasons. Would my daughter ever marry and if she did would she have children was a biggie. Then, would being such an integral part of my grandson's life even be possible since I work fulltime as do both of his moms, and my husband. Most of the time, I just refused to think about it in the years since Reese was born, grateful for whatever time we did have together. But, just recently, shifts in child care arrangements for Reese made my assistance on Friday afternoons a gift for all concerned.

I didn't realize how real those doubts and fears of mine had been until Reese and I were actually working in the garden that afternoon. "I'm really here! I'm really here gardening with Reese." I kept saying it to myself, over and over again, as he chatted away about the gardens. Jenny, Amanda's wife, is an avid gardener and has been involving Reese in gardening since he was large enough to hold a baby rake! This kid at age 6 is well on the way to becoming a master gardener, telling me all sorts of things I did not know. But I also was able to share with him some of the little gardening tips I had received from my mother years ago and this fascinated him! He was so excited to know there was a history of gardening in his family. This delightful afternoon

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reminded me powerfully once again that God is always doing amazing things in my life and the lives of my family, if only I will take the time and make the effort to notice.

My little encounter with Reese's garden yesterday, and the miraculous scope of this six year old's gardening knowledge, is a reminder of why we all can relate to Thomas in today's story. "Doubting Thomas" as he has come to be known is so much like us, isn't he. We all fantasize about the miracles we would like to experience, hope are possible. But, when those experiences do materialize, we can't quite accept them as real. This was exactly what Thomas struggled with when he was not with the disciples the first time Jesus appeared to them. When he learned what he missed, Thomas just couldn't believe it when he heard the story upon returning. "I won't believe it until I see the nail marks in his hands and feet," he says. I won't believe it until I touch those nail marks, putting my fingers in the holes!

Now, do we honestly think Thomas would have said something like that if he had any sense at all that the Risen Christ would appear and tell him to do just that? Of course not! Those are the brash words of someone convinced he is right and everyone else is wrong. Maybe Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared because he had just had it with all the weeping and the carrying on and the wondering what to do next which must surely have been the mood in that room filled with Jesus' disciples before they experienced the resurrected Jesus. Maybe Thomas was so angry about everything – losing Jesus and seeing his friends devastated and bereft – he just needed to get out and get some air to clear his head. We've been there, right? We know what it's like to be with a bunch of people who are just so

distraught about something that it feels like they're sucking the air out of the room. You reach a point where you just have to take a break from it all or you'll explode. Maybe that's what happened to Thomas and that's why he wasn't in the room when Jesus came.

And maybe that's why he just couldn't believe it when he did come back and heard this fantastical story. After all, we don't know how long he was out of the room. The text doesn't say. It could have been only a short time, 15 or 20 minutes perhaps. He leaves because he just can't stand the weeping and wailing one more minute. He goes for a walk to catch his own breath, steady his own racing thoughts and aching heart. And then he steels himself to go back into the room where his friends are, expecting to be deluged once again with tears and weeping. Only now they're not crying anymore! Instead, they are smiling and laughing and so very excited to tell him this unbelievable story of the Risen Jesus come back to see them. No wonder he reacted as he did! He probably thought they had experienced some kind of collective dream born of their desperation for a different outcome than what had happened. He probably worried for their sanity! "Unless I see the nail marks and put my finger in the holes I will not believe," he says. Snap out of it, he is telling them. This didn't happen. This couldn't have happened.

And the conversation ends there. A week passes. A full week with Thomas at odds with his closest friends. They knew what they had seen and he was convinced they were just nuts, victims of their own collective grief and the delusion it had produced. It must have been a difficult week for all of them. And then it happened. Jesus came back. And he came right up to Thomas and said, put your finger in the nail marks in my hands. Put your

hand in the hole in my side. Do it, Thomas. Do it so that you cannot doubt but believe.

Notice the text doesn't tell us whether or not Thomas actually does put his finger in the wounds. Maybe he does. Maybe he doesn't. We just don't know. We only know what he said to Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" And that's important because Thomas is now acknowledging that Jesus is so much more than a friend with a special relationship with God. Thomas knows that the resurrected Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. He knows that Jesus has been transformed by his time in the tomb to some entirely new reality. Interesting here is Jesus' response to Thomas – "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe." That comment, dear friends, is addressed to us as much as it is to Thomas. Perhaps more. In fact, Thomas and his doubts are what created the opportunity for Jesus to make that statement to us, to all the generations over the past two thousand years in the midst of all our doubts – "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe."

That's us. That's the church in all its many forms and expressions which have appeared over the almost 2000 years since that fateful encounter between Thomas and the Risen Christ. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe." That's the church today and we have our very own doubting Thomases confronting us, responding to the good news of the Gospel with such skepticism and doubt that Thomas' reaction seems mild by comparison. Our reality as members of the church in the 21st century is that it's not only the Risen Christ that people doubt. It's the church itself. Why does church matter?

How is it still relevant? How can God exist when so much evil has been done and is being done in God's name? How can the church claim to be holy when too many leaders of the church writ small are so distinctly un-Christlike? "Do I believe in God?" this generation asks. "Maybe. But I sure don't believe in the church."

That is our dilemma as we contemplate our future as the people of God gathered together as this faith community. And we know it. We know we don't have as many young people here as we would like to have. And we know there are a whole lot of reasons for that. Life is just too busy with too many other choices, too many other options for Sunday morning to spend it here. So what are we to do? That is *the* question for us, isn't it? Our Threshold Project for revitalizing our church is just beginning and we are committed to making our church what it needs to be so there is a future here for the long haul. To do that we are confronting this question head on. We are working together to find our own answers. This work requires us to see our own nail marks in the hands and feet of the church and move beyond them. What do I mean by that? Let me explain.

I had a wonderful opportunity, a unique opportunity, several years ago afforded me by David Cranmer, our very own organist and choirs director. Some of you may know that before he retired, David was a professor at New England Tech where he taught in the Humanities department. Yes, they do have humanities courses at a technical college! This particular semester Dav was teaching a World Religions class. As part of the class, he would ask folks from different religious communities to come into the class as guest speakers and I had the privilege of coming to his class to speak about Christianity. And what an amazing

conversation we had! This was a classroom of six young men pursuing degrees in everything from gaming design to cyber security to automotive technology. They were young and enthusiastic and very intelligent, asking me very, very good and very thoughtful questions. Some questions were about basic issues like what's the difference between Protestant and Catholic. But, as the time wore on, we got into more and more and I soon realized that it wasn't God they doubted so much as it was the church. Actually, my sense is that they are hungering to know more of God, to find a way to connect with others with that same hunger, but not seeing the church – any church – as a resource for doing that. Too much to distrust in the church – too many arguments about what to believe and who's right and who's wrong. Too many hurtful things done in the name of the church. Too many church leaders who care only about themselves and what they can get out of the church for themselves – money, power, prestige. The church, for them, had very little positive going for it and a whole lot of negative piled up in their minds and hearts, burying any possible relevance under piles of detritus the church and its leaders put there themselves.

Those are our nail marks, dear friends. We in the church are battered and bruised by life and by all the bad stuff that has happened in churches over the years. The church of the Risen Christ has nail marks in her hands and feet and the people of the church have put them there themselves without even realizing it. Every time we argue about points of doctrine or belief instead of living our faith as Jesus tells us to, we drive in another nail. And those nails are in danger of nailing shut our doors so that too many of the next generation can't find a way to open them to be

here in a way that makes sense to them. These young people and the families they will one day have need to know they belong here, questions, doubts and all. They need to know the message of the Gospel we have to share – the great commandment of Jesus that we are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and we are to love each other as much as we love ourselves. And the church is where we nurture and support each other in doing that because it is so very difficult to do in a world like ours.

That’s what I told those young men at New England Tech and I could tell by the looks on their faces that they had never thought of church that way before. And I suspect so many of our young people – all the “nones” and “dones” being written about in the media – would react the same way to the Good News of Jesus Christ that is ours to share. That is our challenge, dear friends. We must work together to heal our nail marks as church so we can become the church the next generation is searching for. We must find a way to move beyond the damage done to us by other churches who have so tarnished the meaning of what it means to be church. We need them to know church as a warm, inclusive and safe place where their questions are welcomed and encouraged. We need them to see our church as a resource for all the challenges life presents them with each day. We need to find all sorts of ways to welcome them into the community, the family, which this congregation is so that they can experience firsthand that the church is capable of being so much more in their lives than just someplace to ignore, or even fear. The good news for us is that the hunger for the message of Jesus in the world outside our doors is as strong as it’s ever been. Stronger, I think. The

only real question for us is then in this moment is, what are we going to do about it?

Amen.