

“Astounding Thomas”
Rev. Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Easter
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Scripture Reading: John 20:19-29

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘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.’

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ ²⁸Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ ²⁹Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’



Sermon: “Astounding Thomas”

If you know the name Mark Mothersbaugh, it’s probably because you’re a child of the 80’s and remember him as the lead singer of the band Devo. For the uninitiated, Devo was a fringe 80’s band known as much for their avant-garde style as for their music. If you’ve ever seen the video for their big hit “Whip It,” then you probably remember the red plastic flowerpot hats they wore.

But today, Mark Mothersbaugh is one of the most prolific composers of music for TV and motion pictures in Hollywood. If you’ve ever sat down with your kids and watched *Yo Gabba Gabba* or *The Rugrats Movie* then you’ve heard his music. The list of movies he’s scored includes *Rushmore*, *21 Jump Street*, *Pitch Perfect 2*, *The Lego Movie*, *Cloudy with A Chance of Meatballs*, and a whole bunch of others. And if you have watched the train wreck that is *Tiger King* on Netflix, whether you’ll admit to it or not, then you’ve heard his music, because he wrote the score for that, too.¹

But no matter how prolific his career or how much he accomplishes, for most people, Mark Mothersbaugh will always be the lead singer for an alternative 80s band with a penchant for funny clothes and weird electronic music.

And that’s not unusual. We often reduce a person to one characteristic or remember them for one thing and ignore the complexity and depth of their whole lives. For instance, Daniel Radcliffe is well-known for playing Harry Potter in eight movies, but I bet you didn’t know he is also a published poet.² Rowan Atkinson, famous for playing the bumbling Mr. Bean on TV and in movies, also holds a master’s degree in electrical engineering from The Queens College, Oxford.³

I think it must be hard to have your life and reputation reduced to just one thing. The disciple Thomas is one of those people. Everyone remembers him as “Doubting Thomas,” because when the other disciples told him they had seen Jesus, Thomas wouldn’t believe unless he could see for himself. Most people don’t know anything else about the man. Frankly, there’s not a whole lot more to know. We judge him based on one story, and even *that* story is misunderstood.

There is more to Thomas’ story though, so today I want us to get to know Thomas a little better. But to do that, we’re going to need to go back to a story we’ve already talked about. Three weeks ago, we read the story of Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead. One of the important parts of that story that we left out then because we just didn’t have time to get into it was the significance of that story taking place in Bethany.

Now if you take out a map of the Holy Land, you’ll find that Bethany was very close to Jerusalem. It was about two miles away, which is about the same distance (as the crow flies) from Overbrook Church to Centennial High School or the club house at the Ohio State Golf Course. That’s a little longer than a casual walk, but it’s not a particularly short distance either.

And if you read all of John’s gospel, you’ll find that twice, when Jesus was in Jerusalem, some of the Jews took up rocks to try to stone him for blasphemy.⁴ The second of those times was in the chapter immediately before the story of Lazarus. So, when Jesus tells the disciples he is going back to Bethany, they are concerned for his safety. He’s going back to the

Jerusalem suburbs, back within range of those same Jews who have already tried to kill him twice! *“Rabbi,” they say. “The Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?”*

But when Jesus shows he is committed to this journey back towards danger, one of the twelve stands up and challenges his fellow disciples saying, *“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”* Care to guess who that brave disciple was?

Thomas.

You see, the unfortunate thing about Thomas is that people remember him as the doubter. But he was the bold and courageous disciple who was willing to follow Jesus into danger when the others weren't. Thomas shows himself to be courageous and loyal to Jesus. We could more accurately call him “Fearless Thomas” or “Devoted Thomas.” Especially since his label as the doubter isn't really accurate or fair.

On the evening of Jesus' resurrection, as the disciples are gathered behind locked doors, hiding because they were afraid the Jewish authorities would come and arrest them, too, Jesus appears in front of them and speaks to them and shows them his hands and side. But John tells us that Thomas wasn't with the disciples that night. And so later on, when the disciples tell Thomas the amazing thing that has happened and what they saw, Thomas replies that he won't believe unless he sees too.

For generations people have taken that to mean that Thomas was weak of faith. But we've already seen that Thomas trusts Jesus implicitly. He was willing to go with Jesus back to dangerous Bethany, even though it might mean death for both of them.

So, what I think, is that when Thomas says he won't believe unless he can see and touch for himself, what he means is that he won't believe *them*. He never denies the truth of the resurrection. He doesn't doubt Jesus. He doubts *the disciples*. And when you think about it, that's not really all that unreasonable. Put yourself in his place. Try to forget a lifetime of Sunday school lessons for a just moment and think, if you had been in Thomas' shoes, would you have believed, *without question*, what the disciples were saying?

Maybe you would. I mean, after all they *were* his friends. Why would they lie about something like that? Maybe he hears them and knows what they are saying must be true, but he just can't *believe* it. Which also makes sense because there's a profound difference between *knowing* a thing and *believing* it.

Knowing resides in the head. Belief resides in the heart. For instance, I *know* food is important for life. But I *believe* BBQ is the most perfect food there is. The first thing, I *know* because I've been told by people I trust. The second I believe, *because I've experienced it*.

What Thomas really wants is what the other disciples already had: a chance to *experience* the risen Christ; to actually see Jesus and to touch his wounds. And when Jesus comes to him and invites him to do exactly that, Thomas exclaims “My Lord and My God!” What an amazing profession of faith! Thomas believes! But it wasn't the words of the disciples that convinced him. What convinced him was his own experience of the risen Christ.

Many of you have had experiences of Christ. I know I have. But those were probably encounters with people who embodied Jesus and showed Christ's love. That's certainly true in my case. One of the main ways that Christ impacts our lives is through other Christians. And I worry that is one of the ways that the church fails in its mission. We do a great job of saying what we believe and going through the rituals of faith and worship, but like Thomas, for most people *hearing* about Jesus isn't enough. What they hunger for is the chance to *experience* him.

Which, on the one hand is God's work, but on the other hand is work that we are called to have a part in. Certainly, God works in mysterious ways and the Holy Spirit is always working in the lives of people to help us experience the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of Christ.

But as disciples we are called to share our faith and show Christ to the world. How do we do that? By living our faith. By doing the things Jesus did, loving the way Jesus loved, building more bridges and fewer walls, worrying more about the well-being of others than about our own portfolios and bank accounts. We can call ourselves Christians all we want, but unless we live that life, our words are meaningless.

Franciscan Priest Brennan Manning once famously said *“The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.”*⁵

Our words mean nothing if our lives don't match. It's up to us to live the way Jesus lived and to learn the lessons that Jesus taught. It is important for us to care for one another, to meet human need, to love God and neighbor and our enemies. We've got to care for those Jesus called "the least of these, my brothers and sisters," we've got to strive to live the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We've got to love the way Paul describes it with patience and kindness, telling the truth and not rejoicing in wrongdoing. And when we fail, as scripture says we all do, we have to own our mistakes, repent and get better. And when others fail, we've got to forgive and allow room for them to repent and try again, too.

The glory of Easter is not just that we are given new life and a second chance, but that the world is reborn, and the Kingdom of God is at hand! But true as they may be, simply saying those words will not change people's lives or help them come to know God better. Because like Thomas, for most people *hearing* about Jesus isn't enough. What they hunger for is the chance to *experience* him. And if they don't experience him in you and they don't experience him in me, then where are they going to find him?

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Mark Mothersbaugh - IMDb." IMDb, 17 Apr. 2020, www.imdb.com/name/nm0006205/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1.

² Cracked_Images. "Weird Things In Famous Peoples' Past." Cracked.com, 18 Dec. 2017, www.cracked.com/pictofacts-854-celebrities-who-should-be-famous-something-else-entirely.

³ "Rowan Atkinson - Wikipedia." 15 Apr. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rowan_Atkinson#Early_life.

⁴ John 8:59, 10:31, NRSV

⁵ "The Ragamuffin Legacy | RELEVANT Magazine." RELEVANT Magazine, 16 Apr. 2013, relevantmagazine.com/god/practical-faith/ragamuffin-legacy.