

Show Up for Community

I absolutely love highlight videos. Many of you know that I am an avid Boston sports fan and love watching the Celtics, Red Sox, Bruins, and Pats. I try to catch as many games as possible, but with the busyness of the last month- I've often had to settle for the highlights. What's funny is how entertaining and enjoyable these videos are. They do an amazing job of just dishing you the best moments and pivotal plays that make an impact on the game. A couple days ago, for example, I chose not to stay up until 1:30am to watch the entirety of the Red Sox's 8-6 win over the Angels. When I woke up at 8:00am, I was able to catch every play I missed in a nicely cut up 10-minute video with all the highs and lows that the game had to offer. If you enjoy highlight videos, then today's sermon is for you.

Over the past 5 years since arriving at the church, I have had the joy of preaching on this passage and on this Sunday 4 times. The only year I missed the opportunity, was when we welcomed a guest preacher, Dr. Eric Barreto, back in 2021. I am by no means complaining about having to preach on Doubting Thomas so much, because I absolutely love Thomas' story and this Sunday. In fact, Thomas is my favorite disciple. This may be surprising to you, because we know so little about him from scripture. The passage that we just heard Jackie read, is really his only claim to fame and it doesn't paint him in the best of lights. Yet, there is something so compelling to me about Thomas' story and his doubts.

This week, I thought it would be fun to revisit my past sermons on Thomas and in doing so I was able to find some interesting parallels and takeaways that I believe are worth exploring. Today's message will be a highlight reel of my favorite moments from these past few years of preaching on this story. I'll be honest... my immediate reaction from my past 3 sermons is that I come off as a huge Thomas apologist. This is probably due to the fact that I am a staunch Thomas defender. I thought I did a better job of hiding it, but every single sermon I preached on this passage had me defending Thomas in so many ways and from so many different angles. That will be continuing this year, so this is my disclaimer at the beginning. In today's message, I am going to share 4 excerpts from past years of reflecting on Thomas and his story. My hope is that they will help us key in on what this day is all about as we move into a new time and season of the church.

But, before we dive into that, let's ground ourselves in this moment and this day. At the church, we have just finished the 40-day Lenten journey with our Savior through the wilderness. Here are the highlights: Our theme for Lent was to slow down and Show Up for God. Many of us took part in or led Wednesday Evening Services, which provided opportunities to find God in the midst of our busy schedules. Some of us took on a devotional or gave something up to take time to be with our Lord. We then made it to Holy Week and retold the story of Jesus' final moments through the Palms, the Last Supper, and Jesus' death. It all culminated with a boisterous and wonderful celebration of Jesus' resurrection last week on Easter Sunday. After all of that, we arrive at our present moment, the Second Sunday of Easter, and are left wondering what it all means.

Today is the beginning of a new season, when we are invited to reflect on what the Easter story is about and apply it to our lives. This Sunday is an inflection point in the year, as we have a chance to catch our breath and reflect on what our Lenten journey through Easter means to us. To

help us with this, our church is framing these next couple of months as a time to Show Up for Community and it is apt that our scripture lesson is all about the community that gathered after Jesus' resurrection. To begin our reflection, we turn back the clock to 2020 and hear my first ever attempt at retelling this story from Thomas' perspective:

“Thomas was one of the twelve disciples who followed Jesus around during his ministry on earth. He heard him preach, watched him perform miracles, and got to spend a lot of time with him. He loved Jesus and knew him to be his Lord and God as we heard in today's passage. Now, imagine that this beloved friend and teacher of yours was taken forcibly from you and sentenced to death. You hear about how he was hung on a cross, died, and was buried in a tomb. A few days pass as you continue to grieve, and some of your fellow disciples come up to you and explain that Jesus is alive and appeared to them. They begin to say that they saw marks on Jesus' hands and the open wound in his side. They are talking about receiving this thing called the Holy Spirit and how they can now forgive sins. Meanwhile, you, Thomas, have not seen Jesus, received the Holy Spirit, or been told to forgive sins. How would you react? Would you believe them instantly, that he had, truly, risen from the grave?”

(SERMON SLIDE)

I enjoyed revisiting this summary from Thomas' perspective, as it made the story more personal. Given that these events happened almost 2000 years ago, it is easy to feel separated from them as so much time has passed. Thomas shows us that even one of the closest followers of Jesus felt separated from the Easter events too. Just because the other disciples had this miraculous encounter, didn't mean that Thomas could immediately get behind their story and believe them. Last week, Pastor Emily began her sermon by asking if we had ever had an out of body experience. I imagine that there were many, like me, who could relate to this, but perhaps others couldn't. Like Thomas, even though friends or family may have had these out of body or Divine encounters, it can be hard to relate to and believe what others say. The truth is that it can be difficult to hear about encounters of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or God, and never personally experience something like that. Thomas' reaction and Thomas' doubt, speaks to the reality that many of us yearn or long for an encounter with God, but are still waiting for it. For many, this can leave them feeling left out or that it is not fair.

If you have ever felt this or may be feeling it now, know that you are not alone. Last year, I narrowed in on how this was the case for Thomas too by saying...

“I mean just look at how unfair the story is to him. Thomas missed out on the first encounter with Jesus, when all of the other disciples were with him. Couldn't Jesus have just waited for him to be there too, or had Mary make sure he was there with the others? Instead, he had to find out from the disciples who were in the locked room. It is no wonder that Thomas had a hard time believing what they were saying and had to see it for himself. And remember, the other disciples had a difficult time believing that Jesus was truly back too when they heard it from Mary. They were in fear, even after hearing that Jesus had returned. They needed to hear his message of peace twice and see his hands and sides to know that it was him before they rejoiced. Recall that every character in the story from Mary, to Peter, to the disciples, and Thomas needed to see Jesus in order to believe. When we stop to think about it, Thomas was only asking for what the other disciples and Mary had already received from Jesus. Why

should he be the only one left out and not get to meet Jesus post resurrection? Nonetheless, it took a full week for him to be afforded the same treatment.”

(SERMON SLIDE)

Payne Theological Seminary President and Scholar Michael Joseph Brown emphasizes that Thomas is chosen from among the disciples to dramatize the group’s disbelief. He is not the only one of Jesus’ followers to have doubts or trouble believing that Jesus did what he said he would. Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener last week, until he called her by name; the other disciples were in fear of their lives, not trusting that Jesus had overcome the grave; and there are many times when other disciples have trouble believing Jesus throughout scripture. Thomas was not the only person who had doubts or disbelief, because practically all of us have moments of doubt or disbelief in our lives. Yet, Thomas was chosen as an example for us. He stands as the primary foil to teach a point and spread the Good News that Jesus wanted to share.

In our Monday email called the First Light in 2021, I summarized the Good News of the story of Doubting Thomas by stating... **“On the Second Sunday of Easter, we continue to ponder the mystery and wonder of the resurrection. Some of us may feel as Thomas did so long ago, doubting that Jesus had truly come back from the dead. Needing to see it for himself, Thomas waited until he saw the evidence. The Good News is that Jesus did not leave him to his doubt and will not leave us to ours. Thomas was transformed after seeing the marks in Jesus’ hands and side. He proclaimed his renewed faith saying, “My Lord and My God!” How are we being called to change and transform because of the resurrection? How can we answer the challenge to Care for ALL with Faith, Hope, and Love? The Easter story reminds us that our Lord has conquered the grave. Through Jesus, all things are possible. Let us live into that love, share that love, and be that love to those around us.**

The Good News this morning is that Jesus did not leave Thomas to his doubts, but showed up for him. In his moment of disbelief and need- Jesus was there. This is the major point and takeaway that I have year after year when I return to this passage. In spite of and through his doubts, Jesus chooses to be there for Thomas. Certainly, it is difficult to believe this when you haven’t experienced it yourself. Yet, Jesus states that **(John 20:29) “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”** It takes a lot of faith to believe without seeing, but remarkable things can happen when we believe.

In 2022, I went into the history surrounding Thomas and some of the incredible work that he is said to have done after coming to believe fully in Jesus’ resurrection:

“[Thomas] is name dropped one more time in Acts which lets us know he lived on, but then we don’t hear from him again. Well, that is not entirely true. Our Bible stops there but there are other records of the disciple Thomas. In fact, a rich history exists about the disciple. Many accounts detail that Thomas left the other disciples in Jerusalem and went off into Asia to spread the message of Jesus. Some say he went as far as India sharing the good news and many Christian communities today credit him with establishing their faith tradition. The Thomas of our Bible may have ended, but the historical Thomas seemed to have continued to share about his risen Lord to people who did not see it for themselves as he had. I find this fascinating as we see the doubter continue to do the work of the Great Commission.

(SERMON SLIDE)

After his doubting, Thomas went on to spread the Good News of Jesus far and wide. He shared who Jesus was with others and established new communities of disciples. Because Jesus showed up for him, Thomas showed up for others.

Pastor Emily and I had the joy of attending the ISKCON temple opening yesterday afternoon. It was a large gathering of religious leaders, government officials, and members of the ISKCON community. Ananda, the President of the Temple and our interfaith clergy vice president, shared that her vision and hope for the new temple space was to be a place that blesses lives of the community. Many speakers talked about the importance of community and the wonderful diversity found here in our county and our state. I found the event and gathering to be so moving. People from many different backgrounds showed up in one space to celebrate and eat together. It felt appropriate, or like a God sighting, that as we are launching into our new theme of Showing Up for Community, we were able to take part and Show Up for our Community here in Potomac and hear from so many other religious and political leaders about the importance of Community. Often, simply by Showing Up and being there, our presence can make an enormous impact on those around us.

As we enter into this new season and seek to Show Up for Community, how might you do that these next couple of months? What communities are you a part of right now? How do those around you need you to show up in their lives, as Jesus showed up for Thomas? This is our guide and focus these next weeks as we make our way to the summer. Will you Show Up for Community? Amen.