

## McCabe United Methodist Church

***Living to Tell the Story: Thomas***  
**Sermon on John 20:19-31 (Easter 2; 4/2 & 4/3/16)**  
Pastor Jenny, with Dave Hagler (as Thomas)

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*God of death and resurrection, I pray these words are acceptable and pleasing to you. May this Easter story nestle-into the hearts and minds of all who hear it...and may we be inspired to live and share its joyful hope. Amen.*

In many Christian churches – The United Methodist Church included – Easter is celebrated not just as a *day*, but as a *season*...a 50-day season that lasts from Easter Eve until the holy day of Pentecost. So, even though the Easter merchandise is all on clearance at every retail establishment in town, it's *still* Easter. And it will be for another 40+ days.

Last weekend, when we *began* our celebration of Easter, we sang music that reminded us of God's strength, God's love, and the hope we find through Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead.

Last weekend, we heard the first part of the Easter story as told by the Gospel writer John – the part of the story where Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb the Sunday after he'd died and had been buried.

We heard about how Mary had arrived at the tomb sad, grief-stricken. We heard about her fear and confusion upon discovering the stone rolled-away from the tomb...and we heard about her joyful surprise when the resurrected Jesus appeared before her – how he called her by name and told her to “go and tell” the disciples he had been raised.

Mary Magdalene's place in the Easter story is deeply important to me, a preacher who happens to be a woman...because it matters that the first person to witness our resurrected Lord was female.

Not only that, but Jesus himself instructed Mary to “go and tell” the good news of his resurrection. He didn't tell her he would wait in the garden so she could go get the guys in order for them to see Jesus for

themselves...no: he gave Mary permission to be the one to share the news.

In a world that still so often questions how much authority women should have – perhaps especially within religious institutions – Mary Magdalene is a blessed, sainted gift.

So...it was from Mary's perspective that I preached the Easter story last week. Today, we'll hear from someone else – another “famous character” within the Easter story.

His name is “Thomas” and, though the Bible itself only ever calls him “Thomas” or “Didymus” (which means “twin”), Christian culture has bestowed upon him the nickname “Doubting Thomas.”

Where Mary Magdalene has affectionately become the patron saint of preachers who happen to be women, *Thomas* is the patron saint of skeptics...the patron saint of those who need physical evidence if they are to believe improbable things.

And, really, isn't that each of us, at one time or another in this life? In certain circumstances, don't we all need tangible proof in order to believe improbable things?

I wrote last week's sermon years ago, when I was serving as the associate pastor at First United Methodist Church in Pierre, South Dakota; I've updated it and preached it again a couple times since.

What you are about to experience – the Easter story according to Thomas – is something I borrowed with the permission of one of my good friends and colleagues, Rev. Howie Baird. Howie currently serves as the pastor of Wesley United Methodist Church in Grand Forks.

I heard Howie preach a sermon over 10 years ago, written from Thomas' perspective, and I was so moved by it that I asked him if I could borrow it and use it myself – giving him proper credit, of course.

At this point, I have made so many modifications to my friend's original script that it remains only a fuzzy reflection of what he wrote. That said, I am forever grateful for my friend Howie's "Thomas," and I pray you are as blessed and challenged by his story as I continue to be...

***[Thomas narrative begins]***

When they told me their story of Jesus being raised from the dead, I laughed and said, "No way..." I had just wanted to get on with my life. To go back to fishing – like the old days. No concerns. Just me, my boat, my nets, and the wide-open water.

Back to the simple life... Before Jesus... Before all the lessons, and the teachings, the healings, the other miracles... And before all the pain of those last weeks.

A few days after he died, I had been sitting by myself at home, deeply saddened and frightened by the loss of my friend and teacher.

And then the other disciples came barging in with their crazy story: "We have seen the Lord!" they said. "We have seen the Lord!"

I couldn't believe it – why would they say such a thing?

We had all seen him hanging there that Friday afternoon – fighting for every breath. Those two thieves next to him, the crowd mocking him. "If you're so great...save yourself!" they all cried.

I wished he would have. I had seen him perform all those miracles. I'd seen him mend all those broken legs, give sight to the blind, I'd seen him cleanse lepers... I'd seen him feed thousands of people with next to nothing.

I saw him do those things. So why *not* come down off the cross? Why *not* save himself?

But he didn't save himself. Whether he couldn't or *wouldn't*, who knows. But he didn't.

Those who stayed by the cross while he hung there said they could almost see his spirit leaving his body as he breathed his last breath and said, "It is finished."

It *was* finished. Just like everyone else who got crucified by Rome, Jesus *died* on his cross. He didn't save himself. He died and was buried...with witnesses to prove it.

Then, on the third day after he died, the others started telling their stories...tall tales, as I thought at the time. It was like they were so desperate to have Jesus back with us that they willed themselves to believe something that simply could *not* be true. The dead do *not* come back to life.

Sure, I had been there when Jesus had raised *Lazarus* from the dead. But Jesus was gone – and none of *us* had the power to bring him back. *He* had been the one doing the resurrections...there was no one here to resurrect *him*. Only God could do that...and at that point, I didn't know whether or not I believed God really *could* resurrect.

It had been three days. Three days of trying to make sense of it all. Three days of realizing he really was gone. Three days of trying to accept it...to accept it and to begin to move on.

Then my friends told me their story; their tall tale. "No way!" I told them. No way... It doesn't work like that.

I had been so full of doubts – so completely sure that when Jesus had been buried it really *was* all over. Resurrection...new life...it just didn't seem possible to me.

After Jesus died, all of us disciples were so scared we would be next – that the religious leaders and the Roman officials would come after us, just for being his followers.

Worse than that, though, we were scared that, with his death, everything else had died, too: his teachings, his miracles...his grace.

Jesus was a force of nature. He filled our lives so full of goodness and strength. When he died, the void was overwhelming. Massive.

When my friends first told me about how he had shown -up the Sunday evening after he had died, of course there was a part of me that hoped it was true.

But how *could* I believe? Death is death and that's that. It's final. That is what I knew to be true. And then everything changed.

A week later, we met at a friend's house. Suddenly all eyes were on the wall behind me and I heard a familiar voice say, "Peace be with you."

My heart began to race. I started sweating. I was afraid to look...but I had to. I had to see this with my own eyes. Could it be?

Though it felt like my feet were nailed to the floor, I managed to turn around slowly, and there he was...standing right there among us. "No way," I thought. "No way..."

Before I could say anything, he looked right at me and said, "Thomas, put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." Then, lovingly – mercifully – he said, "Do not doubt, but believe."

It was almost like he showed-up again *just for me*...because he knew I was doubting. At that moment, I fell to the ground: "My Lord and my God!" I exclaimed.

Then Jesus knelt down, took my face in his hands and said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

When he said that, I thought about everyone who would come after

us: our children and our children's children...those we would meet in the years to come and those who would hear this story for *generations* after we were dead and gone.

When Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed,” the blessing was for everyone who would come after us.

*“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

That blessing is for you...for your children and your children's children. It's for everyone *you* meet: it's a blessing Jesus bestows upon you so *you* can tell this story...so *you* can tell the world of his love, so *you* can tell others about how he showed-up in *your* darkest moment – bringing you hope and reminding you... you are not alone.

This story is my story and I will treasure it always. But it's your story, too. May you treasure it as I have...and may you share it with a world that's in desperate need of resurrection hope.

As mine did, may your own “*No way!*” transform into “*My Lord and my God...*”