

4-19-20

Indescribable Joy

Pastor Diana Ziegler

Scripture reference: John 20:24-29

We walked into today's reading from the Gospel of John after all of the disciples, except Thomas, had seen Jesus, had witnessed for themselves that the redeemer lived following His death on the cross. It would be eight days before Jesus would appear before the disciples again. Eight days for Thomas to hear about Jesus' presence in that house; eight days for Thomas to wonder, for Thomas to wait for Jesus to appear again; eight days for Thomas to bounce between hope and fear, between doubt and faith. What an agonizing time that must have been for Thomas. All the other disciples were discussing the indescribable Joy they experienced upon Jesus' appearance - upon knowing that the son of God, the savior of the world, had risen from the dead and He lived!

They tried to convince Thomas of the reality of the resurrection, but Thomas couldn't believe them. Perhaps it just seemed a little "too good to be true"... That's not so different for us today is it? We live in a rather sceptical world where human nature finds it difficult to believe in almost anything that is good. The fact is, we find it quite easy to believe in something bad. If asked to believe in something good, our response is often, "That is just too good to be true." How often do we utter the words, "That is just too bad to be true."? Bad news is easy to believe, and we readily believe the bad news we hear; but the good news is often almost unbelievable, and we express our doubts...

When Thomas expressed his doubt to the other disciples regarding the resurrection, they were not the only ones who heard those doubts... Jesus also heard his doubts. And this is something we all need to remember, just as the risen - but unseen Christ - had heard Thomas' doubts, He is witness to our own doubts whether spoken or not... Doubt is heard by Jesus when it is present in any form; and he heard both the spoken and unspoken doubts of Thomas.

Eight days after Jesus first appeared to the disciples, he returned to them and this time Thomas was present. Knowing of Thomas' doubts, Jesus invited him to come and touch His wounds, but surprisingly, Thomas did not take him up on his offer... Why?... This was the perfect opportunity to gain that physical proof that he said he needed in order to believe. But something happened the moment Jesus entered that room. You would think that Thomas might have thrown himself at Jesus' feet, or jumped up and down in the excitement of knowing Jesus lived but he didn't do that and he felt no need to touch the wounds, because he immediately knew of and felt that indescribable joy the others had talked about. Thomas was so overcome that all he could do was say, "My Lord and my God." In that very moment, Thomas had made the transition from doubt to faith. We all have to take that journey, make that transition into faith. One way or another, we have to make that transition... We have to truly know that indescribable joy. So how do we know if we know that?

I know this is not the same, but most of us have seen videos of family members being reunited with loved ones who have been serving in one of our branches of the military. The expressions of pure joy, of indescribable joy, are seen in their faces and in their body language, and is often felt through the television or computer screen. You know what I'm talking about. We see those videos on facebook, or Youtube, or on talk shows - there are no unjoyous reunions. This hits home a little more for me now than it did in the past because my middle son is now in the military. He is currently serving in the Army reserves and, very selfishly, I find I am grateful he is currently serving as a student at UWGB. I haven't had to worry about a telegram or phone call or front door visit telling me he has been injured or killed; but my mind does go there periodically because it is a possibility... So more than in the past, I can truly feel the indescribable joy that I see in those videos.

Although the circumstance is quite a bit different, that's the best way I can think of right now to help me explain the kind of joy Thomas felt upon seeing Jesus that day. Thomas' joy came from letting go of the fear, of the doubts planted in his mind by Satan, and from succumbing to the overwhelming love and devotion he felt both to and from Jesus.

Thomas is not unlike many of us. Most people have that negative characteristic of doubt at one time or another, at one level or another, but most people are also very committed when that doubt is erased, just like Thomas was. I wonder sometimes, Thomas doubted, but was that really so bad? I mean, yes, his story could have been tied up in a pretty little bow if his faith had not wavered, but is that realistic? He was human just as we are. He was stalked by Satan just as we are. We can learn much from Thomas' story. Sure, he doubted, but when he was sure, he went all in! "My Lord and my God" - there is no half-way in that statement... Thomas had doubted Christ's resurrection, but when he became sure, he was sure; there was absolutely no question. Isn't that how our doubts are rectified? We question, we wonder, we pray and ponder; and then when we "know", we know... And when we know, when we are sure and no longer have those doubts, we are relieved, we are happy, we are joyful in our certainty.

We need to see ourselves in Thomas' story. I know I see myself there - maybe more often than I would like, or would like to admit... I believe that I am strong in my faith, but I also know that doubt creeps in from time to time. I find myself in much the same position Thomas found himself - believing and wanting to believe all of it, but finding it difficult to look ahead to the unknown and see (and believe) in the good that is there.

I don't think I am alone in my scepticism. Many of us are inclined to look backward instead of forward. Forward scares us -we see that more clearly now as we face this pandemic with COVID-19. The harder the struggle, the more frightening the future. Too often we tend to look to the future with some despair, expecting the worst. Yet we look to the past and talk about "the good old days" as if the best times are behind us. If we really believe that and really

believe that things will only get worse, aren't we really saying things like: War is inevitable, so why work and pray for peace? Crime and poverty are here to stay, so why work and pray for a more just society?... Is that what we really believe? If it is, then what we are saying is that evil will triumph - Satan will win, and there will never be what we read about in Isaiah, Peter, Corinthians, and Revelations - we are saying there will never be a new heaven and new earth.

Wow! That's pretty harsh, pretty extreme, and maybe a little too much... but is it really? When we have doubts about our Lord and Savior, aren't we then giving Satan a little more rope so to speak?

My mind does this to me from time to time - and I honestly don't think that I am alone in those thoughts - I get stressed out, I feel uncertain, and I find myself fighting for my faith and I wonder why it sometimes seems so difficult. And then I remember, this distress I feel, this uncertainty I feel, has been explored, discussed, and justified. This uncertainty, this doubt, is a test of my faith. 1 Peter chapter 1 says: "... even though it may now be necessary for you to be sad for a while because of the many kinds of trials you suffer. **7** Their purpose is to prove that your faith is genuine. Even gold, which can be destroyed, is tested by fire; and so your faith, which is much more precious than gold, must also be tested, so that it may endure. Then you will receive praise and glory and honor on the Day when Jesus Christ is revealed." (1 Peter 1:6-7)

Our faith will be tested, but we cannot stop searching for that indescribable joy that we saw in Thomas when faith overwhelmingly won. Thomas is not unlike many of us. The struggle to faith was hard for Thomas and the harder the struggle is to true faith, the more doubt there is to overcome. But then, when it is overcome, greater is the wonder and the joy when the Christ of history, the Christ we read about, becomes our personal Savior and Lord.

You know, when Jesus saw Thomas he said to him: "Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe." I used to think he was scolding Thomas for not believing in what he couldn't see. But he wasn't scolding Thomas, He was expressing words of hope for those of us who would not have the opportunity of seeing him before his ascension into heaven. Jesus was speaking to all of us who believe in His resurrection, He was telling us that there is no need to doubt. We can believe in the good that we so desperately want to believe. His words remind us that in faith we can face the future, not with despair and doubt, but in joyous knowledge that in God's world, that stuff that we find "too good to be true" is not. In God's world there is nothing that is too good to be true. And there is definitely Joy in that!!!

The word of Jesus to us today is the same as it was to Thomas, "reach out ... stop doubting, and believe." My hope is that we can all do that, and be able to say as Thomas did, with indescribable joy, "My Lord and my God." AMEN!