

“When Unbelief Rises Up”

John 20:19-31

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There’s an old story from the times of the Cold War, and though possible that it was made up, you could easily see how it might be a true conversation. A German was once the guest of a Frenchman, and his host asked him how they distinguished between an optimist and a pessimist in Germany. “It’s very simple,” he replied. “The optimists are learning English, and the pessimists are learning Russian.” This man, Thomas, whom we meet once again in our text this morning, would be one those learning Russian. If he had the choice of two evils, he would choose them both. To Thomas the cross was only what he had expected. He knew that Jesus was going to die, and had come to terms with it, so to speak. Remember what he said when Jesus said they were going to go to Bethany when they received the news of Lazarus’ illness? He said in John 11:16, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” If that’s not the most “Eeyore” statement ever, I don’t know what is.

Thomas never lacked courage, but he was certainly a pessimist. What he expected to happen did happen, and when it happened, he was broken-hearted. And he was so broken-hearted that he wanted to be alone with his grief. That is where we find our text this morning. John explains in verses 24 and 25 of our Gospel lesson:

Now, Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe.”

Try to picture that. The news that Jesus had risen again seemed too good to be true, and he refused to believe it. I read once about an English poet who lamented over the death of his beloved friend, “Never again will I risk such anguish again. I will never love anything anymore.” Thomas felt that way too. He felt as though he could never love again, because he did not want to be hurt.

As we study this situation with Thomas, we learn some awfully important lessons for our lives today. First of all, Thomas made a very serious mistake. He sought loneliness in his sorrow instead of communion and togetherness. When difficulty and trouble loom on the horizon, one of the first and most critical decisions we need to make as the children of God is to get together with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ—not away from them. When we separate ourselves from the Christian fellowship and try

to “go it alone,” we are going to lose the battle. Have you ever noticed how often people stay away from God’s house when sorrow or grief comes upon them? Have you ever noticed that when trouble comes into families because kids act up or the parents make a huge mistake, the tendency is to get away and nurse those wounds alone? Our loyalties need to go far beyond a pastor, elder, or teacher drawing people into church. In times of crisis and disappointment, we need to be with one another, never isolating ourselves. If Jesus Christ died on the cross and is now nothing more than a dead martyr, then we can remember Him with flowers at the altar and then go on our merry way. One such as that has nothing to offer us. But if He is a living Christ, it is with His people, gathered around His Word that we find the action, guidance, comfort, and strength to forge ahead with life, whatever the situation might be.

Too often, when things are not right, we get hung up on everything but the right thing. Like Thomas, we get off in our own little corner of life and forget the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Take a look at most churches today, and at one time or another, you find people spending far more energy on the trivial silliness of things than on the Means of Grace which bring us here. They care more about the numbers, what the community thinks of them, and if the parking lot looks inviting enough. But if Jesus came out of the tomb and rose from the dead and is truly alive, our challenge today is as awesome as it is simple.

Are we doing our best to gather around His promised gifts that are brought to us in Word and Sacrament? That is the question we should be asking, regardless of the size of the congregation, or the thoughts of the world around us. Thomas got sidetracked for a while. He left the other believers that were his closest friends when he needed them the most, to the detriment of his faith, no less. He found himself mourning over a dead Jesus instead of being present with the living Christ. That led him to be more concerned with his own feelings and that he knew it all and there’s no way anyone could prove him wrong. He cared more about the size of the holes in Jesus’ hands and side than he did in the reason they were there.

God knows that we doubt, and He knows that we will fall into moments of unbelief. Even Jesus’ apostles were guilty of this sin. He knows that every person here this morning, for one reason or another, is going to be tempted to separate from this blessed communion of saints with which He has surrounded you. Do not give into that temptation. We need each other, and we have been gathered together for precisely the purpose of upholding one another in the faith. When Paul, in Acts 28:15, saw the brethren coming to meet him, he took courage from the sight and experienced comfort.

And that is what we are called to do as well, to seek and find comfort and courage among each other.

Thomas also lays on us a great virtue. When he was sure about something, he went with it all the way. The next time Jesus showed up, the Lord admonished Him for his unbelief, telling him to do what he said he must do, and “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” That did it. Thomas confessed in response, “My Lord and my God!” For Thomas, there were no halfway measures. He was not airing his doubts to get out of serving or giving. He wanted to be sure, and was ready to go the end in unbelief, rather than succumb to more pain and anguish. His feelings were His guide, and the source of his knowledge.

What a cautionary tale this is for God’s people. So many in the world, in the church, lean so much on their feelings as the gauge of their faith and the source of their salvation. If they “feel the Spirit” then they are doing everything right, but if they go to church and feel like they are just going through the motions, then they have some work to do to get right with God. What a terrible and awful burden to bear in our walk with Christ. One, by the way, He has not bidden us to bear. He has not called us to look to Him so that we might get goosebumps on Sunday morning, or feel a sense that we have done enough to be in His good graces. He calls upon us to believe, just as He lovingly reprimands Thomas, saying, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

We don’t need the “feels” of contemporary worship, “feels” which are false and self-serving idolatry. We need the means of God saving grace—the power of His saving Word, as Paul says in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” We need the things which He, by His own words, has called us to gather around. We need His very body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar for the forgiveness of our sins. We need the washing of regeneration as the new man rises from the waters of baptism. And we need the preaching of the Word to bring us God’s gift of grace.

None of these can be ours if we separate from the fellowship of our Christian brethren. That is the sole purpose of the visible church. It is given to us to be a gathering place to receive that which God brings to us so freely, and to receive it with those who also are in the faith of Jesus Christ. It’s not a “one and done” type of thing. You can’t have an attitude of, “I’ll get to church at least once a month, or once a quarter, so I can satisfy the requirement to receive the Supper and hear the absolution.” It may shock you to find out how many people, even in the Lutheran church, feel like that is an ok way to view the faith. No one receives “enough grace” to satisfy them and let them last for a set

period of time, like a gas gauge on your car. We don't have a faith gauge that we can watch and, as it approaches "empty" just stop in for a fill-up and keep driving.

The medicine of immortality is our fuel and we need it every moment we can possibly get it! If you truly believe that you've banked enough grace to reach the end of your journey before you need to fill up again, THINK AGAIN. You've lost the understanding of our total depravity if you have fooled yourself into believing such a thing. This is the issue with so many churches today. When you teach that the focus of the service is what we do for God, and how well and how big and how flashy we do it, people will always feel puffed up like the Corinthians did in 1 Corinthians 4. They will think they've done something special and have earned enough to keep on going.

Thomas isolated himself from His brethren, thinking that He had it all figured out and would find the solution on his own. But the answer lied in their company. The answer was Jesus Christ, the RISEN savior, who appeared before them and would have destroyed Thomas' unbelief before it had a chance to fester. But he removed himself from their presence, and he did not receive the gift of the risen Lord's body for his absolution. He should have known better. As we discussed last week in the Easter sermon, He told them He was going to rise, but they did not believe it. Thomas dug in on his unbelief, because he insisted on resolving it himself.

In times of struggle, find your brothers and sisters in Christ and cling to them tightly, because they are the ones who can point you to the truth that you are loved by God and salvation is yours for the sake of Jesus Christ. They can call you to repentance and to come to the table of the Lord to receive the peace He brings in His Holy Supper, that you might be forgiven of all of your sins. Jesus rose from the dead to assure you of the victory over the evil thoughts and doubts of your mind that lead to unbelief, because without His presence to bring you His gifts, you would succumb to those thoughts and find yourself on the outside looking in.

But by the grace of God, you have been given a blessed gift of a family of believers, a fellowship of saints to hold you up by the blood of Jesus that you would not succumb to the devil. Christ's death and resurrection has made us righteous, and we must all be reminded of that truth every chance we get. We are one body, not in each other, but in Christ. We have been baptized into His death and so also will be united in a resurrection like His, which Paul teaches in Romans 6. When unbelief rises up, turn to the body of Christ for your consolation, because our Lord and Savior has redeemed us all that we might look together to the joy of our heavenly home, where struggles have ceased, and doubt and unbelief are no more. Amen.