

John 20:19-31
A Story About New Life
May 1, 2011

There have been some famous nicknames throughout history. Let me name a few and see if you can tell me who the nickname describes: Honest Abe (Abraham Lincoln), The Gipper (Ronald Reagan), The Duke (John Wayne), the Angel of Death (Joseph Mengele), Air Jordan (Michael Jordan), Dr. J (Julius Erving).

Sometimes nicknames focus on one aspect of a person's appearance or character, or on one incident in a person's life. Here are a few of the more famous examples: Erik the Red (a Norse explorer with red hair), Richard the Lionhearted (an English king who was known to be courageous in battle), Mad King Ludwig (a Bavarian king who wasted money to build fantasy castles), Good King Wenceslas (a Bohemian king who gave to the poor). Some less famous, but perhaps more common nicknames are ones like these; see if you can tell me what they imply about the person: Beanpole (tall and skinny), Fatso (short and stout), 4-eyes (wears glasses), Butterfingers (kid who fumbles the ball in a schoolyard baseball game), Pee-wee (the smallest kid in the neighborhood, Bruiser (the neighborhood bully).

How many of you had or have a nickname? How did you get that nickname? My nickname was "elbows." In high school and college I played center on my basketball team. At 6 feet, 4 inches I typically gave up 3-5 inches to opposing centers. So my coach told me to play wide. I'm not very wide, but with my elbows out I become wider, and they are sharp elbows; hence the nickname. Most people probably do not get to choose their nicknames. And I suppose many people really do not like the nicknames that get tagged on to them.

Today's scripture reading focuses on Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus. Can you tell me the nickname with which Thomas is typically tagged? "Doubting Thomas!" I doubt (no pun intended) that Thomas would like that nickname. In fact, that nickname is not really very accurate. Thomas is actually a disciple who showed great loyalty and courage. In John 11 Jesus says to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples respond, "The Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" And Thomas is the one who says to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:7,8,16). Thomas was ready to stand by Jesus in the face of danger, maybe even death. Thomas is also said to have eventually taken Christianity eastward as far as India. And yet, mention this disciple and most people will refer to him as "Doubting Thomas."

This perception is so well entrenched that we may not hear or see anything else in this exiting and important story about Jesus appearing to the disciples. Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared. The text tells us that the disciples were hiding behind locked doors because they were afraid. Jesus had been arrested, tried, condemned, and executed. Their world had been shaken and they were afraid for their own lives.

We might wonder where Thomas was during this first appearance. I wonder if he was less frightened than the others, out and about town like usual. Or maybe they needed food, and drew straws to see who would be the unlucky one to go out, and Thomas drew the short straw.

At any rate, Thomas later joins the disciples and hears their report that they have seen the Lord. The story goes immediately to Thomas saying that for him to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead he needs to see the mark of the nails in Jesus' hands and the wound in his side. We do not know what else may have been said in that conversation between the disciples, but because of this one comment by Thomas he has forever been labeled with the nickname, "Doubting Thomas."

Thomas was no more doubting or disbelieving than any of the other disciples. Just read the Gospel accounts of how the followers of Jesus responded to the announcement of his resurrection. Matthew's is probably the most positive, ending with Jesus telling the women to go and tell the disciples (Matthew 28:10). But (as Pastor Joanna suggested in last week's sermon) one wonders if on the way the women began to wonder, "Did we really see what we think we saw?" The original ending of Mark's gospel ends by saying, "The women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (Mark 16:8). In Luke's gospel the women go and tell the disciples what they had seen and heard, and the disciples "did not believe them, because these words seemed to them an idle tale." (Luke 24:11). And here in John 20 the disciples are hiding behind locked doors. What I find even more interesting is that a week later (in verse 26) even after having already seen Jesus, the disciples are still behind closed doors. Thomas was no more doubting or disbelieving than any of the other disciples.

If we look at this story with fresh eyes we may see something quite wonderful in the interaction between Jesus and Thomas, something that can be of great reassurance to us as we wrestle with our own searching questions and doubts. Note that Jesus does not rebuke Thomas for asking to see the nail marks and the wound. In fact Jesus' first words are the same ones he spoke at his first appearance to this group of fearful, shaken disciples, "Peace be with you." Not words of accusation or condemnation, but words of blessing and benediction.

And then gracious words of invitation and encouragement, spoken gently and lovingly, encouraging Thomas to move forward in his search for reassurance, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

The Greek word translated as "put" actually means to "set something in its appropriate place," like putting something away where it belongs. I think Jesus is really saying to Thomas, "Put your finger here in the mark of the nails in my hand; put your hand here in the wound in my side, because that is where it belongs. Keep your finger in the mark of the nails and keep your hand in the wound in my side as a constant reminder that I did this for you."

Thomas knew that people don't typically rise from the dead, and yet he wants so desperately to believe that Jesus has been raised, and he is so moved at seeing Jesus that he responds, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas' response to seeing Jesus is a confession of faith and trust, and yet, I would guess that Thomas still didn't understand it all. I would guess that Thomas still had questions and doubts along the way.

Jesus replies, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That would be us. Of the four gospels John's is the last one written, written around the time of the death of the last of the eyewitnesses to

Jesus' ministry and death and resurrection. We have not seen the mark of the nails in his hands or the wound in his side, and yet we have come to believe.

However, that does not mean that we never have any doubts or questions, or that we stop searching for truth and meaning. We all have those moments and experiences when we wonder, "Where is God?" Even I have those moments. One of the things I liked about living in the country was that I could go out for a run on the back roads and scream at God for what I thought was unfair, and no one could hear me, except God. I have to be more careful now that I live in the city, and I recognize that I should probably not scream at God in front of you.

This interaction between Jesus and Thomas is a gentle and loving invitation and encouragement for each of us to face our doubts, to ask our questions, to present our spiritual needs, and to persevere until God responds. Thomas shows us how to ask bold questions and how to be ready and willing to take bold actions. Jesus shows us how to listen to what is really being said when doubts or difficult questions are put forward and how to bless the questioner with acceptance.

Rather than being a story about doubt, this is a story about new life, the new life that is ours because of the mark of the nails in the hands of Jesus, because of the wound in his side. John 20 ends with these words: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." It is these written words, these stories, that help us to keep our fingers and our hands where they belong – in the mark of the nails in the hands of Jesus and in the wound in his side, reminding us that he did this for us. For that is what enables us, even when we are struggling with our doubts and questions, to believe along with Thomas that Jesus is our Lord and our God.

Admiral Richard Byrd spent 6 months at the South Pole, living in a small hut with only the basic necessities of life. One day he wandered away in a snowstorm. Suddenly he realized, in the midst of the now blinding snowstorm, that he could no longer see the smokestack of his little hut. What to do? First he determined that he would not panic. Second he decided to mark the spot where he was so that he didn't wander off farther in the wrong direction. He hammered a stake into the ice, attached a rope to it, and then in ever widening circles moved out around the peg until he walked in the door of his little hut.

Sometimes in the midst of our doubts and questions it may seem like we are lost in a blinding snowstorm. When that happens remember that our stake in the ice is these written words, these stories, that help us to keep our fingers and our hands where they belong – in the mark of the nails in the hands of Jesus and in the wound in his side, reminding us that he did this for us, to give us life. And that is what enables us, even when we are struggling with our doubts and questions, to believe along with Thomas that Jesus is our Lord and our God.