

The Festival of St. Thomas, Apostle
St. John 20:24-31
December 20th, 2017
Sts. Peter and Paul Ev. Lutheran Church
Greenville, SC
Pastor Jerald Dulas

That Believing You May Have Life

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we celebrate the life of one of the Apostles—St. Thomas. Now St. Thomas gets a bad rap because of the events told about in the Gospel from the Evangelist St. John for today. Our Lord appeared to the Apostles in the upper room where they were hiding for fear of the Jews, but St. Thomas was not there. And when told by the rest of the Apostles that they had seen the Lord + Jesus, St. Thomas did not believe it; even going so far as to state that he would not believe it, until he could not only see the Lord + Jesus, but touch Him and His wounds.

It is because of this doubt that St. Thomas has been given the moniker “Doubting Thomas.” It is also on account of this doubt that the Festival for St. Thomas occurs on December 21st, the first day of winter, and the day within the calendar year with the least amount of daylight. For, doubt, both within St. Thomas and within us, is a result of the spiritual darkness of sin, which dwells within our sinful flesh. Therefore, St. Thomas gets a bad rap for his doubt, but in reality, he gives us an example of our own doubt and lack of faith, for the seed of doubt dwells within all of us. And since we, like St. Thomas before he was able to look upon the Lord and His wounds, only have the Word as a means to strengthen our faith; not having the ability to see with our eyes and touch with our hands, our faith in just the Word can be shaken at times, especially amidst the trials and tribulations of this life.

The lack of sunlight that we experience this time of year; this darkness, is a visible reminder to us of the spiritual darkness of the world, and the spiritual darkness in which we lived before we were brought into the saving Light of Truth, by the means of God’s holy Word. This darkness, is a perfect preparation for the season of Light which is Christmas, for in that season, the True Light of the world, our Lord + Jesus Christ, comes down from Heaven and starting with the human flesh that He took upon Himself, brings all flesh out of darkness by His perfect obedience of the Law and will of God. He further frees our flesh from the bondage of sin and darkness, by hanging on the tree of the cross in darkness, so that He might take our human flesh, which is riddled with sin and darkness and bury it in His tomb, so that on the third day, when the first light of dawn breaks upon that tomb for sin and death, our flesh might be brought into the Light.

It is on that very day, the day of our Lord’s resurrection from the dead that He first appeared to His Apostles in the upper room where they were hiding. On the very day that our Lord + Jesus burst open the grave of sin and darkness, so that all mankind might be able to dwell in the light of life and salvation, our Lord comes to His Apostles to free their flesh and their sight and their faith from the prison

house of sin and the shadow of death; the very same prison house of sin and death that is chanted of in the “O” antiphons at Vespers before and after the Magnificat. The Key of David opens the prison, and leads us on the safe path to Heaven. Our Lord uses that key to free the men that He would send out with His Word from the fear and trembling that is caused by the darkness of doubt and shame. Our Lord does this by proclaiming to them His peace. It is by His Word, accompanied by His visible presence that our Lord works faith and hope and joy into the souls of the Apostles.

However, St. Thomas was not present. St. Thomas needed a visible sign; words were not good enough. There are many people today, who cry out for a sign from our Lord that He is real; that His love is real; that His salvation is real, but the only sign that men receive is the sign of Jonah. Our Lord was in the belly of the large fish of death for three days, and was raised again for our justification. This is the only sign that the Apostles received, but they were eyewitnesses both to His death and to His resurrection. They got to see with their eyes the sign that our Lord said would happen. St. Thomas, like us, in the upper room on the night of our Lord’s resurrection did not get to see the sign with his own eyes; he only got to hear about it. St. Thomas is much like those who refuse to believe only because they hear the Word, they must have physical proof that the Lord lives again.

The following week, on the very same day of the week, which was Sunday (the day in our Church calendar to which we refer as *Quasimodogeniti*, the Sunday after Easter), at the very same time of the day, our Lord appeared once more to the Apostles, only this time St. Thomas was present among them. And our Lord shows that He knows of St. Thomas’ doubt by inviting him to look at His hands, and put his hand in His side. Holy Scripture does not make it clear whether St. Thomas took up our Lord on His offer, for no mention is made of it; it would appear from this that no such touching of our Lord was necessary by St. Thomas, for there is only the expression of “*my Lord and my God*”; the declaration of faith from this Apostle who doubted our Lord was alive again.

Now it could be said that St. Thomas believed because he was able to see with his eyes; as even our Lord states. And our Lord adds a promise of blessing to all of us too, when He says that all those who believe, having not seen are blessed. This is a reference to us, for we do not have the ability to see our resurrected Lord with our own eyes. We only have the Word of God, handed down from the eyewitness account of the Apostles and Evangelists. Our eyes of faith see dimly, especially as we live in the dark world filled with sin and hatred for all things from the One, True God and Lord + Jesus Christ. But it is with our eyes of faith that we can see that it is not entirely true that we only have the Word to base our faith upon. For our Lord has left us, by His Holy Ghost, visible signs of His presence among us. These visible signs are His Word and Sacraments, in which we participate whenever two or three are gathered together in His Name.

In Holy Baptism, we have visible sign of our Lord’s death and resurrection, as those who are baptized are drowned and buried with Christ, and as they are lifted out of the water, they are lifted out of the grave, just as our Lord arose out of the tomb. In Holy Baptism, after they have been washed free of their sins by those waters connected to God’s Word, they are given and clothed in a white robe; a physical reminder that they now bear and have put on the righteousness of our Lord + Jesus Christ. For their works that merit them salvation are now the Lord’s works of obedience to the Law. They are also given a lit candle, representing that they have now been taken out of the darkness of sin and the shadow of death, and now dwell in the Light of Christ and His salvation. On Christmas night, we have a yearly reminder of this as we are given new candles in which to light; our Christmas candles that we light amidst the darkness, and these candles represent the dispelling of the darkness as they shine in darkness as beacons of the Light of Christ which dwells within the world. The light from our baptismal candles serves as a visible reminder whenever we light them, that the Light of Christ dwells within us.

The lighting of these candles is also done on the Festival of our Lord’s Presentation at the Temple and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This Festival day even bears the name

Candlemass, that is, the Mass in which our baptismal candles are aglow once more and as the candles that are to be used in our worship throughout the year are set apart, we are given a visible reminder that whenever we see candles lit in our sanctuary and on the Altar that our Lord is present among us, for we gather together, even in the darkness of this world, as the light to this world.

This lighting of the candles is also done at the Vigil of the Resurrection of our Lord, in the darkness of night, the Paschal candle, representing our Lord's death, which brings light and salvation to all mankind, is lit from a fire, and the light of that candle is slowly passed among all those present in the midst of utter darkness, until the entire sanctuary is aglow with the Light of Christ. All these things are a visible reminder that our Lord is present with us; they serve to strengthen our faith, especially in the midst of doubt. For when we see a lit candle we are not only reminded of the Light of Christ which dwells within us, but we are reminded of why that Light dwells within us—our Holy Baptism into His Name.

Our Lord also gives us a visible reminder of His death and resurrection in His Holy Supper. In this holy meal our souls are nourished with our Lord's very own Body and Blood given in bread and wine. The very purpose of this meal is to strengthen our faith, as we pray in the Post-Communion Collect, that this meal would strengthen us in faith towards God and in fervent love towards our fellowman. We pray that God would by this Sacrament give us pardon and peace from the trials and tribulations of this world brought on by our sin and the sins of the world. And we pray that our Lord would "rule our hearts," that is to say, that He would grant us faith to trust in Him and believe that He died and rose again for our salvation.

We have these visible signs of our Lord's salvation that lead us to confess as St. Thomas did, "*My Lord and my God.*" In the darkness of this season, as we may tend to feel shut up in our homes, due to lack of daylight, and lack of warmth outside; as we feel the oppression of this world, and its hatred for our Lord and for us His servants; as we feel the persecution both from the world and from our own conscience which reminds us ever and again of our sinfulness, we have our Lord's preaching and our Lord's Sacraments as visible reminders that our Lord has vanquished all darkness, sin, death, and shame; that He has conquered the devil, the world, and our flesh, and He has buried them all in the tomb, and has risen again from the dead, so that we might exclaim with the Apostles, "*We have seen the Lord.*" Therefore, whenever doubt creeps in; whenever your faith is weakened by the trials and tribulations of this life and world, remember the words of our Lord, "*Look at My hands.*" For our Lord's hands are seen in His works and in His gifts of His Holy Baptism and His Holy Supper. May we look upon our Lord's hands, and His wounds, and rejoice that by these He has dispelled darkness from this world, and given us Light that we may believe and in believing have eternal life with Him. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy Name give glory! I will extol Thee, O Lord, and I will praise Thy Name forever and ever. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.