

**Sermon May 1, 2011 Thomas the Disciple Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO
John 20:19-31**

“When did God become more than a name to you?”

This is one of the Quaker questions often used as an icebreaker in church groups. A corollary question would be , “When did Jesus become more than just a name to you?” The name may be one you grew up hearing or perhaps in the midst of all the secular festivities , you heard the name. Whether by gradual understanding or a lightning bolt moment, somewhere along the way your spirit awakened to the truth that Jesus is more than the name of someone who lived a couple thousand years ago.

The scripture this day contains many threads that might be appropriate for sharing.

First is fear, for note that the disciples gathered this first evening in fear of the Jews. Fear, is as I shared some time ago, False Emotion Appearing Real.

Second is Peace. Note that Jesus says to the disciples, Peace be with you. He shows them his hands and side, and again says “peace be with you.” So a theme might very well be what is peace in your life, what brings you peace?

Third: He breathes on the disciples and gives the Holy Spirit to them. Now this is only to the disciples. So a sermon might be on the Holy Spirit.

Fourth: he gives them the power to forgive sins or retain sins. Well, a message might be on forgiveness, sins, and power.

Fifth: Thomas wasn't there, and his absence began a process of trying to authenticate Jesus...so we might consider the question, “who is this man, Jesus?” Or of doubt, which is the usual theme on this low Sunday after Easter.

Sixth: It is a week later, and the disciples are again in this house, and Jesus comes and stands among them and again says “Peace be with you.” Jesus instructs Thomas to put his hand in side. Jesus continues to explain to Thomas, don't doubt, but believe.” A sermon on “what is it we believe after this great Easter experience.

Seventh: Thomas' response: My Lord and my God! Sermon-what are these titles

Eighth: Believing because you have seen versus believing because you have not seen. A great sermon. Being blessed because you haven't seen and yet believe.

Ninth: The other signs that Jesus did not written down. This would lead to other experiences of Jesus which some of the other disciples experienced, and which we'll explore in the coming weeks: on the road to Dasmacus, Peter and others at the lake.

Tenth: Come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and by believing have life.

Thomas' commitment to Jesus' earthly mission was enthusiastic and wholehearted. Thanks to Thomas' persistent inquiry into where Jesus was going (John 14:5), Jesus was provoked into saying "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." But Thomas was fueled and fired by his experience as a witness to Jesus' actions -- the miracles performed, the people transformed. Thomas was attentive to Jesus' deeds -- not nearly as attentive, however, to his words

Thomas is confronted here with nothing but words, "hearsay" we might call it, about Jesus' miraculous resurrection. Thomas has to decide how to integrate the alleged appearance of the risen Lord into his old belief system. Thomas chooses to fall back on his old reliable source of strength -- the plain physicality of Jesus' earthly mission. A faith based on "seeing-is-believing" had held Thomas in good stead thus far. Why change his tune now?

What Thomas failed to understand is that Jesus' mission and ministry had now moved light-years forward. Literally, while Thomas was "out of the room," the rules had changed.

Thomas, could readily identify with the work Jesus was doing, healing the sick, raising the dead, bringing life back to the dead.

But now there is a new way of seeing, experiencing the living God, the one we call Messiah. It is not the physical Jesus. It is not the one who simply had some interesting teachings. It is a new way of living.

When Jesus said to Thomas, put your hands in my side, he was essentially saying, "Ok, Thomas, I'll work with you on your journey. If this is where you are, then I'll meet you there." Suddenly Thomas recognized, realized that there was more than a simple physical plain to life. There was a dimension far and above what even he could imagine. It was here that God became more than just a name for Thomas. Now the disciple said "My Lord and My God." Now Thomas knew that there was one who was there to uphold him, support him, love him, and enables him to move beyond places even he thought he could not go.

Zan W. Homes writes of hearing the late Bishop Paul Martin tell of the time when he "received a new church appointment early in his ministry. The congregation planned a reception for him on his first Sunday. During the reception, everyone came around to greet him except for one man who lingered in the rear of the room. After everyone else had greeted him, this man came forward and simply stood there. The future bishop asked him, 'What do you do here?' The layman said, 'I look for the preacher's weaknesses.' And he added, 'I'm good at it! But when I find them, that's where I get beneath him, and then I lift him up.'"--Zan W. Holmes, Encountering Jesus (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 54-55.

Thomas had his weaknesses. We have ours. Jesus lifted Thomas' weaknesses up. He does so for each of us, lifting us up out of our fears, doubts, and weaknesses. This is the risen Christ. This is new life. This is the resurrection. The question to ask is not "When did God become more than just a name to you?" but rather, "How is God more than just a name to you now, in this moment at this time in our life?"

So come to this table to be renewed, to have your doubts and weaknesses lifted up, come one and all. Amen.