

Message: “No More Disbelief”

Rev. Desmond Tutu said, “It’s often difficult for us to recognize the presence of God in our lives and in our world. In the clamor of the tragedies filling the headlines, we forget about the majesty present all around us. We feel vulnerable and often helpless. But we aren’t helpless and with God’s love we are ultimately invincible. Our God doesn’t forget those who are suffering and oppressed.”¹

Trust and doubt seem to go hand-in-hand. It’s part of the human condition. I think one reason is we’re mortal and we know it. We know we have limits and we fail. I also think it’s due to curiosity. As curious creatures, we want to know more, to see, hear, touch, taste and feel everything around us. We explore and discover the world through our senses, physical and spiritual.

But what does it mean to use our spiritual senses? That’s what the disciples were asked to do in Jesus’ day. It’s what we’re asked to do today. After all, we only read the eye-witness accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection. We don’t get to experience the risen Christ in person. We can only experience God’s presence spiritually. So it’s not surprising some of us trust and accept easily, while others want to go more carefully. God made us this way, giving us different personalities and shaping us through different life experiences.

That’s why I think Thomas often gets a bad rap. He wasn’t present when Jesus first appeared. Thomas wasn’t the only one who expressed doubt about the miraculous story they heard from the women. He may have believed the group could be fooled, either by group psychology or by spirits playing a cruel prank. After all, Thomas asks not only to see the wounds, but to be able to touch them, to know Jesus is real. He wants to be sure before he’s “all in.”

Thomas is only the first in a long line of people who struggle to trust God. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, struggled with trust issues. Even though he was raised a Christian, ordained as an Anglican priest and served as a missionary to the Chickasaw Indians in the

¹ *Center for Action and Contemplation, daily devotion, April 19, 2022*

Georgia area, both John and his brother Charles were anxious about their salvation.

You can live a moral life, doing good, caring for others and struggle with faith. For John and Charles, a difficult missionary trip and a fearful storm on their return journey – both difficulties we can understand, led them to an anxious period in their lives. They were wrestling to understand how God’s grace works. They saw how the Moravian believers dealt with the same issues with little fear, fully trusting in God and living with unexplainable humility.

I think Thomas, the Wesleys, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu and others all have the same nature. It’s one we can identify with. It’s not that we don’t have faith. We need assurance that we are forgiven. Only then can we find the “*peace which passes all understanding*” (Phil. 4:7). We all encounter this moment in our spiritual lives.

The question is, “How will we respond?” For John and Charles Wesley, they found their hearts “strangely warmed” after attending a Moravian Bible study at Aldersgate Street in London. John Wesley later said, “*I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation and an assurance was given to me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.*”²

The Wesleys discovered the same spiritual truth Thomas did in his encounter with the risen Christ. They realized they had it backwards. We don’t have to be holy and righteous, living a moral life to be right with God. We don’t have to do everything right, to be of value, before God accepts us. God loves us first and won’t give up on us!

What we can discover is amazing. Christ alone makes us acceptable to God. Christ alone redeems and restores our relationship with God. Salvation is a pure gift of God's amazing, justifying grace. Nothing we could ever do or say can earn God's love and acceptance. When we realize the depth of God’s love for us, we can finally understand Paul who wrote, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ*

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/battle-will-part-4-john-wesley-jonathan-edwards/>

Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:8-10).

We are saved by grace through faith, amen! Jesus’ passion on our behalf restores our relationship with God. Once we accept God’s love and grace, wholly and completely, we find ourselves with an assurance and an unusual state of peace.

Yes, trials and troubles happen. We can live through them without fear, knowing God is watching over us. Yes, we’ll face the loss of jobs, life changes, illness, injury or accident, all sorts of trials and challenges in life. But none of those situations have the power to separate us from God, who loves us and cares for us unconditionally.

What an amazing gift! The only response we can have once we accept it is to live into it, boldly and confidently.

The disciples did. Acts 5 shows this to be true. Peter and the disciples are no longer hiding in a room, afraid of what the authorities might do. They’re out and about, living large. They’re living life the way Jesus taught them to. They’re teaching in the outer court of the temple. They meet for prayer, teaching, a meal and communion after work each day. They’re caring for the sick, poor and needy. They’re living their faith. People are joining the group every day. And others take notice.

Luke narrates, “*The high priest, together with his allies, the Sadducees, was overcome with jealousy. They seized the apostles and made a public show of putting them in prison*” (Acts 5:17-18 CEB). “Out of sight, out of mind” – that’s what the high priest must have thought.

There’s only one problem: an angel of the Lord opens the doors to the prison at night and sets the apostles free. When the temple police show up in the morning, there’s no one there! Rather than trying to drag the apostles into court, they ask them to come. There the high priest issues a demand. They must stop telling people about Jesus.

Peter and the apostles boldly reply, “*We must obey God rather than humans!*” (v29). What a powerful witness! The disciples hiding behind closed doors for fear of the authorities are gone, never to return. Instead, you have a new, Spirit-filled group of believers who know who and what

they are – God’s children, on the mission Jesus gives to all who follow him, making disciples. That’s how the world will be transformed.

They get it. There’s no more disbelief. Jesus’ resurrection changed them. God’s Spirit has the power to change us as well, just as it transfigures the world. We’re like brown grass which becomes bright green again. Or trees with gnarled, leafless branches burst forth with sap flowing so birds sit chirping in leafy branches. Or once dry streams now gurgling with flowing water. Winter gives way to spring and nature seems to experience its own resurrection.

“[Grace] says nothing, no one and no situation, is [beyond hope]. The whole of creation, nature, waits expectantly for its transfiguration, when it will be released from its bondage and share in the glorious liberty of the children of God, when it will not be just dry inert matter but will be translucent with divine glory.

All over this magnificent world, God calls us to extend [God’s] kingdom of shalom - peace and wholeness - of justice, goodness, compassion, caring, sharing, laughter, joy, and reconciliation. God is transfiguring the world right this very moment *through us* because God *believes in us* and because God *loves us*.

What can separate us from the love of God? Absolutely nothing. And as we share God’s love with God’s other children, there is no tyrant who can resist us, no oppression that can’t be ended, no hunger that can’t be fed, no wound that can’t be healed, no hatred that can’t be turned to love, no dream that can’t be fulfilled.”³

If you’re still in doubt, not quite ready to fully receive and accept God’s unconditional love, it’s okay. It’s not up to any of us to tell you when you’re ready. If you find yourself in this situation, I invite you to make a bold prayer. Pray for assurance. Then wait. God will do a marvelous work in your life. It won’t be easy. It won’t be pleasant. I’m speaking from experience. You’ll find yourself on your knees before Christ. It will be the best thing that ever happens to you.

³ *Op cit, Tutu*

For those of us who have “strangely warmed” hearts, I offer this invitation: how can you share your experience of God with others?

There are many spiritually hungry and thirsty people in our neighborhoods. Let’s seek them out and give them a gift of love.

Let us pray ...

O living Christ, as the good news of Easter energized your first disciples to establish dynamic Christian communities, so energize us to dynamic life within our congregation and community. As your Spirit gave them courage to stand tall before the powers of this world, so empower us to proclaim your gospel and struggle for justice and peace. By your presence with us now, make us one in love and mission. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

Acts 5:27-32 (CEB)

The apostles were brought before the council where the high priest confronted them: “In no uncertain terms, we demanded that you not teach in this name. And look at you! You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching. And you are determined to hold us responsible for this man’s death.”

Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than humans! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead - whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God has exalted Jesus to his right side as leader and savior so that he could enable Israel to change its heart and life and to find forgiveness for sins. We are witnesses of such things, as is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

John 20:19-21 (CEB)

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"

Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.