

*St. Thomas, Confessor*

Sometimes it's good to begin a sermon with a joke. In fact, in some places it's a tradition to tell jokes on the Sunday after Easter Sunday. A joke, or a pop culture reference, or a personal story can be a nice way to gently draw listeners into the sermon. But this morning I want to take a much more direct and serious approach.

This morning I'm remembering something a former parishioner who was very dear to me once said to me. I had ministered to this man during his wife's long bout with cancer, a battle that ended in her death. And then I ministered to him through his own bout with heart disease. He also died. In reality I only did for him what I would do for any church member, no more and no less. Still, we became close. During his final illness he said to me. "I used to think that you preachers had it pretty easy, getting up in the pulpit every Sunday morning and telling people that they're going to Hell. Now I know what you really do."

Perhaps many people see preachers, and see me, in that way: as judging others and condemning them for the pulpit. This morning my thoughts are not so much on judging you and threatening you with Hell; my thoughts are more on my own sin and my fear of damnation. But if I'm sharing some of my own spiritual struggles with you, my existential angst, what Luther called *anfechtung*, then perhaps it will help you work out your salvation too, because we all, as the Bible says, work out our salvation in fear and trembling.

What I want to say this morning is, I have sinned. To use the words of the Lutheran Book of Worship's *Compline* service, "I confess to God Almighty, before the whole company of heaven, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault. Wherefore I pray God to have mercy on me, forgive me all my sin, and bring me to everlasting life. Amen."

In the story of St. Thomas, “Doubting Thomas” we call him, our gospel reading today, I see a reflection of both my own sin and my hopes for salvation. You all know the Doubting Thomas story. He was absent from the disciple’s gathering the first time the risen Christ appeared to them, and then he would not believe their report that Jesus was resurrected. We sympathize with Thomas because we too think that you can only believe what you have seen with your own eyes. But let’s dissect Thomas’ doubt a bit further. It’s not just healthy skepticism. It’s something far worse. It’s unbelief and the despicable consequence of the false teaching that springs from disbelief.

Thomas had lived and worked with Jesus. On more than one occasion he had heard Jesus explain the Holy Scriptures saying that he, the Messiah, the Christ, must be killed and rise again. The reports that Thomas heard that Jesus had arose were not from unreliable strangers. These reports came from Peter and John and James and Mary Magdalene and the others. These were people he knew, loved and trusted, people Jesus knew, loved, and trusted. Thomas had every reason to believe in Jesus’ resurrection even without seeing.

How can we explain Thomas’ unbelief, his hardness of heart then? I would call it arrogance, egotism, and narcissism. He did not trust the message of Christ’s chosen witnesses. He did not believe the Scriptures. He did not believe the Word of Jesus himself. Thomas thought he knew better than the apostles, better than the Bible, and even better than God. In his error, Thomas could not be the witness to the gospel he was called to be. Speaking his doubts sowed the seed of disbelief in others. That is sin.

So, let’s talk about me now. What are my sins?” I will tell you, they are many. I confess that I have been wrong about many things: points of doctrine, concerns of theology, and how to apply the Bible to life. Like Thomas, I have failed to listen to the apostolic witness, and failed preach and teach the unadulterated Word of God. I fear that my errors

in Christian doctrine, that came from a faulty understanding of scripture and the Lutheran confessions, I may have passed on to you in my preaching and teaching. For that I am truly sorry and I want to make amends. It is my responsibility to do so and to fail to do so would be to risk my very soul.

Pastors have a particular burden regarding the souls of others. This burden is explained again and again in scripture, most notably in God's word to the prophet Ezekiel. As a herald of God's kingdom coming, I have a responsibility to deliver to you the message that God lays on my heart. That message comes from His Holy Word. If I proclaim that message to you and you receive it, that is well and good. If you don't receive it, that's your problem and God will deal you. But if I don't proclaim the message God gives me, then your blood is on my hands. Then I am responsible for failing to proclaim Christ. That is sin.

I do have several excellent excuses for my sins. For instance, I am only human and I am a victim of original sin. I can't help but sin; it's in my nature. And then again, I was severely misled by unworthy teachers and false prophets who under the guise of academic freedom perverted the Word of God and failed to pass on to me the faith once and for all handed down to the saints. Instead they taught me their own erroneous, unbiblical opinions and speculations as if they were the gospel truth. They were not. And then there was the pressure on me to go along to get along with the rest of the modern church. Everyone else was doing it; it was what was required for advancement in the hierarchy. Of course, these excuses do not excuse my sins or anyone's sins. The pardon of our sins only comes through the blood of Jesus.

Thomas saw the risen Christ. He saw his scars. What a simultaneously terrifying and glorious experience that must have been! Doubting Thomas went on from there to be a believer, a preacher and teacher, and, eventually, a martyr. Thomas' unbelief was forgiven

and his sin pardoned, and he proclaimed Christ. We might call Thomas a true theologian. Luther said that theologians are made by prayer, meditation, and trial. Thomas' doubt was his trial. His exclamation to the risen Christ calling him "My Lord and my God," was the prayer that said it all. As for me, I've never prayed quite as much as I would like to and I've probably meditated more than I would like, especially if worry counts as meditation. I never had to go looking for trials, they always had a way of finding me, and to be candid, the last 2 years or so of turmoil in the church at large has been an incredible trial.

But God works all things out for good for those he loves, the Bible says. Through prayer, meditation, and trial, God has brought me to a better place of clarity and understanding. I was challenged to immerse myself in the Lutheran Confessional writings which I have done, and it has been nothing short of a rebirth for my spirit. This is not my achievement, but the work of the Holy Spirit. Pardoned, forgiven, and renewed, I am now ready to preach Christ and teach the unadulterated Word of God, and correct anything I may have misspoke or not been perfectly clear about in the past.

God has revealed me what it is I should preach and teach. This did not come from a special revelation; I didn't hear a voice or have a vision. God doesn't work that way. He communicated with me as he communicates with us all, through Word and sacrament. What exactly is it I'm called to proclaim? I had hoped to at least mention all the various most important points that need to be addressed in this congregation at this time. But time will not allow for that today. So I'll identify just a few in a cursory way now. But you can expect more biblical, confessional, doctrinal preaching from me in the weeks, months, and years to come, and you can be sure it will all come directly from the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions.

A big problem with the mainline churches in recent years is that they have taken a "namby pamby" approach to doctrine and theological, never taking a strong stand on anything,

never standing up for the traditional faith, selling out their confessional heritage, and being blown to and fro by every wind of change, every –ism, that happens by. The mainline churches have become the sideline churches, theologically vapid, declining rapidly in membership, in captivity to culture, and generally irrelevant. The churches that are alive and growing are the ones that teach the Bible, preach Christ, and are not afraid to challenge the prevailing status quo. That is what we want here.

In this church we will know what God says. Here we will know what we believe. Here we will not be afraid to say what we know to be true. That might sound confrontational and polemical, but Jesus was polemical, and Luther was polemical, and there will always be such polemical preaching in the church as long as people care about the purity of doctrine and right teaching. This congregation can be a center for Lutheran confessional faith if it will boldly follow Christ.

The primary point of our Lutheran Christian faith can be summarized this way: We believe in justification by grace, through faith in the vicarious atonement of Christ, and that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired, inerrant Word of God, and the only source and standard of faith. There are other important points of faith as such as the doctrines regarding the sacraments. But what I must preach, and you must hear, again and again, is that Jesus died for our sins, to the exclusion of other theories of the atonement, and that the Bible is God's Word to us, in opposition to other misguided theories about what the scriptures are and other ways God supposedly reveals himself to us.

The risen Christ revealed himself to Thomas. Just as surely, Jesus, the Word of God reveals himself to us today in the Holy Scriptures, which are also the Word of God. So, unlike the Doubting Thomas, but like the Believing Thomas, be ready to meet Christ, him risen from the grave, here each week in Word and sacrament. Amen.