

Sermon: April 11, 2021 (Second Sunday of Easter)

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"SOMEBODY DONE SOMEBODY WRONG"

John 20:19-31

There's a country song that insists "Somebody done somebody wrong." The church has done "some-bodies" (lots-of-bodies) wrong over the centuries. The emphasis here is on "bodies" because our culture likes to pride itself on the body even while the culture war has harshly judged bodies that are not male, straight, and rich. The new culture war is against trans people. Do you think that we ever realize how many people have their identity, dignity, their very hold on life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness pressed into a partisan battle and fashioned into a political weapon? People are often used for all kinds of nefarious purposes. In the name of what we think is good, we can do a lot of damage. As soon as we start looking down on people, we are vertically-challenged by the gospel of Jesus.

Thomas has been the object of this kind of "being done wrong." He was one of the 12 apostles, but he has been used by preachers in search of a sermon illustration. So they named him "Doubting" Thomas. There are plenty of people who know what it's like to be used, cruelly. There are people who are experts at identifying vulnerable, marginalized people and demonizing them in return for political gain.

"Doubting Thomas" has such a contemporary ring to it. Giving people harsh nicknames has become an art form in our politics. The political theatre has become a tragedy pretending to be a comedy. What concerns me is that so many millions of Americans laugh and enjoy the way we are now attacking and demeaning and putting one another down. People use nicknames to hurt and degrade people. And at least 48% of Americans like negative nicknames. During the 2016 presidential race, **name calling spread like wild-fire among political candidates** (Craig R. Smith, "Ronald Reagan's rhetorical re-invention of conservatism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, published online 16 Sept 2016, 33 – 65). And the name-calling exploded from there: Pocahontas, Crazy Joe, Little Adam, Crooked Hillary, Wild Bill, Lying Ted, Low Energy Jeb, Crying Chuck.

The politicians can hang nicknames till judgment day, but the church ought not be in the name calling game. In the church, we are in the new name business. The church should be a place of refuge for all kinds of people. Jesus insists that God's kingdom is a large tree that attracts all kinds of colorful birds, strange birds, and weird birds – but there's room for all.

My interest here is wanting to know why we have this propensity to demean others who disagree with us? How have we managed to connect name-calling with a sense of humor? How has Christian speech become "bar room" talk? People who have had too many gin and tonics at the bar may talk like this, but people filled with the Spirit – never!

In Terry Kay's novel, *The Year the Lights Came On*, the pastor of a small-town Methodist congregation faces serious conflict in his church. He does not ignore the strife; he does not try to pour oil upon the water. He does not call in a conflict management consultant. He goes to the Bible and does what God called him to do – preach the gospel. He selected the story of Cain and Abel as his text. He spoke a parable of brothers and forgiveness, and he challenged each church member to remember the church motto: I am only one, I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And what I can do, by the grace of God, I ought to do.

In this fictional account, after the sermon, the Holy Spirit moves quickly to bring about congregational reconciliation. The members move toward one another in forgiveness. "Preacher's right. Fighting among ourselves is wrong, bad wrong." "What I said last week, well it didn't mean nothing. Y'all know I didn't mean nothing, I hope." "My fault as much as yours." "I reckon I started it." "This is too good a community to be tore apart by arguing." Do you suppose that southern fiction could become lived reality? I'm not sure, but I am convinced that only the Holy Spirit can save us from our bitterness now.

I admit that the phrase, "Doubting Thomas" disturbs me greatly. No one calls Peter "Denying Peter" or "King of Denial". He's considered the Rock, the first pope of the church. No one says "Sticky Fingers" Matthew because he was once a tax collector. No one says "Elitist" John because he was more of a philosopher. No one says "Smelly" Andrew because he was a fisherman. Thomas, of the 12, only Thomas, gets a low-grade, demeaning nickname and he doesn't deserve it.

Look, it's my task to help you. And right now, I'm going to help you with a biblical example. In the story of Israel conquering the city of Jericho, there's a woman named Rahab. The editors tell us she was a prostitute. Ellen Davis tells us that her name was probably an old soldier's joke. Please note the relationship between names and jokes. These two have been hanging out and doing damage across the centuries. The Semitic word means "wide"; in Ugaritic literature, it appears as a term for the female genitalia. People

heard the name and chuckled; they knew what to make of this "broad" or so they thought. But in the story her name is completely transformed, and her reputation changed forever. She's the woman who let down the scarlet rope that saved the spies from death. She is the first person to confess orthodox Israelite faith within the borders of the Promised Land. The theology of the book of Joshua is that some nations (represented by Rahab) will be spared a punishment they deserve, and Israel (also represented by Rahab's confession of faith) obtains a land they do not deserve. And in case you miss the transformation, the inversion, look at the family tree of Jesus in Matthew 1 and there's Rahab. No DNA test required. No denying the relationship. Rahab belongs to our family.

I want us to give Thomas and one another a serious break. His was not unbelieving doubt. It was honest, emotional, anguished, "I want to believe" doubt. This was "I believe, help my unbelief" doubt. Don't we know that honest doubt is always mixed with faith?

Well Thomas was more than a doubter. He blurted out what he was thinking. Impulsive. Normal. A natural person. After Jesus learned of the death of Lazarus, he determined to go back to Bethany. The disciples tried to dissuade him because his enemies there were seeking to kill him, but Thomas says, "Let us go also, that we may die with him." Why didn't we name him "Loyal Thomas"?

When Jesus said, "You know the way to the place where I am going," it was Thomas who said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Why haven't we called him "Seeking Thomas" or "Philosopher Thomas" or "Questioning Thomas"? There's so much more to Thomas than doubt.

And then there's this special moment: Jesus comes back for Thomas. "Jesus came and stood among them." As promised: "Where two or three are gathered, I will be present." Down the ages the church has trusted this promise. So when Thomas missed church, Jesus came back for him at the next meeting. Jesus comes for the doubters, the skeptics, the unbelievers. Remember Jesus looked on the rich young ruler and loved him. Jesus meets Thomas bearing his doubts into church. **"Do not doubt but believe."** Thomas cries, "My Lord and my God." Give me a thousand men and women like Thomas: MY LORD AND MY GOD! I think the time has come to call him "Honest" Thomas.

The good news is that Jesus not only shows up, but he has something to say that can deliver Thomas and some of us from mistrust, doubt, and fear. This matters so much because Americans are trapped in so much mistrust, fear, and violence. We need the presence of Jesus and when he comes he brings gifts, Easter gifts. **"Peace be with you."** In a world of name-calling, hostility, fear, greed, arrogance, pride, alienation, Jesus comes with a new reality: "PEACE!" Then he gives Thomas a new purpose: **"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."** Jesus sends us into the world. Having doubt didn't disqualify Thomas from ordination. All that we do is to be done in the name of Jesus. And then, Jesus says, **"Receive the Holy Spirit."** This is Pentecost for introverts, quiet people who don't like noise and emotional religion. And just in case we don't know what we are supposed to do with this Holy Spirit power, Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." We are to use Holy Spirit power to forgive. This is the work of the church and if we don't do it, the world's sins are retained. Our vocation is forgiveness.

It is time to stop doing some people wrong. The church not meant to be a wall that divides us; a barrier that excludes us. People don't need a green card or an ID or a certification that they are good. We can let go of "Doubting" Thomas and all that name calling and condemnation. We can pass out the Easter gifts that Jesus gave to Thomas: **Peace, Purpose, and Power.** Leave your bag of old doubts at the altar and receive the gifts of Easter. Amen