

Touch the Proof

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Text: John 20:19-29

SCRIPTURE

John 20:19-29

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

1 John 3:1-3

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

This morning in the second service we will be baptizing Thomas Harper Pumroy, who is the son of Kyle and Kelly Pumroy, and the grandson of Abby and Tom, nephew of Marta, cousin of Paiton. It seemed somehow fitting that we are baptizing Thomas and that our Gospel text for this morning is about Thomas. Although this is a story that is not very complimentary to Thomas. This is the passage where we get the term "Doubting Thomas." But then again, if we are honest with ourselves, we are all Doubting Thomases aren't we? At one time or another we all have identified with Thomas. We would like to believe. We would like to have faith. But somehow again and again those doubts keep creeping in.

Thomas had to have absolute proof. He had to know for certain. He had to be able to touch this proof. He needed physical evidence that was irrefutable. He wasn't even going to believe his eyes. He wanted to be able to touch and feel. Until he had such proof he planned on withholding judgement, He was going to keep his doubts. He was not going to believe.

Now, one thing you have to keep in mind is that when they talk about "belief" or "believing" in the Gospel of John, they are talking about more than just accepting some basic facts intellectually. Believing is a matter of being in the right relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. What is the most well-known verse in the Gospel of John? It is John 3:16, of course. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone

who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” So when Thomas is talking about the need to have proof before he believes, it is more than just knowing the facts. It reflects a desire to be in a right relationship with God through Jesus. Thomas is saying to the other disciples, “I need more than just your say so. It needs to be real to me. It needs to be something I experience for myself.”

I would argue that Thomas is not so much doubting as he wants to connect with the Risen Christ in a real and personal way. He wants to touch the proof, to verify in a tangible way that Jesus is risen and everything has now changed forever. And as I said we are all like Thomas. We all want to touch the proof; to experience for ourselves a personal connection with God. Somehow we want to know for absolute certain before we are willing to put our trust in God.

But when it comes to faith, what is it that we want to know for certain? Where do we want to touch the proof? Over my years of ministry, I have encountered very few people who are outright atheists, who don't believe at all in the existence of God. But I have encountered people who need proof of what God is like, what kind of God exists. More specifically, do we have a God who really loves us, who is interested in our lives and cares about us? Is there any proof that God loves us? If we could touch such proof, well, that would make a big difference. It would change everything when terrible things happen in this world, when there are wars and terrorist attacks or natural disasters. It would make a difference in our own lives, when confronted with great sorrows or tragedies. When we face dark and difficult times is there any proof that God cares and loves us, or is God just out there, running the universe, perhaps, but not at all concerned with the nitty gritty details of each of our lives?

I believe there is such proof, and I will get to that in a moment. But when we find ourselves doubting like Thomas and holding back on trusting is often when we are relying on false proofs of God's love. Thomas and the other disciples thought they understood who Jesus was, but in the face of the horror of his death, their confidence was shattered. When we use these false proofs for our foundation, we are lost when tragedies come crashing in on us. So before I talk about the real evidence for God's love, I want to make three statements about these false proofs.

Statement number 1: The proof of God's love does not rest on our own merit, achievement or worth. In other words, God does not love us because we deserve it or have somehow earned it. Now, this may seem obvious, but there are many people who deep down really believe this. God must love me because just look at all the good things I have done. I am such a wonderful person. I pay my pledge to the church on time. I volunteer every chance I get. I have read my Bible cover to cover three times. Of course God loves me. Or what is more likely, they are the opposite. God cannot possibly love me because I am a terrible person. I am always losing my temper. I am selfish and mean spirited and I never call my mother. How could God love a dreadful person like me?

But it doesn't work this way. Human love is not something that can be earned, and God's love is far beyond that. The clearest evidence that God's love is not something we earn is the story that Jesus told about the Prodigal Son. The younger son did not do anything to earn the father's love, just the opposite in fact. He did everything that he could possibly do for his father to hate him and turn him away. Yet when this son comes staggering home, reeking of a pig sty, the father runs to greet him, and throws a big party to celebrate. That is the way God loves us and it is not because we deserve it or have somehow earned it.

Statement number 2: The proof of God's love does not rest in that we always get what we want. As most of you know I am thoroughly enjoying being a grandfather, and as your grandchildren start to grow they remind you of different things that your own children did when they were the same age. I was thinking about an incident with my oldest son, David, when he was about 6 or 7 years old. We were leaving the grocery store and David wanted me to give him a quarter for one of those vending machines by the door. You know what I am

talking about; those machines where you put in a quarter and get back a cheap plastic toy worth about two cents if that.

Anyway, I said no to David. I wasn't going to give him a quarter. Well, he wasn't going to give up to easily. As we walked out through the parking lot he began to whine and complain. He used every line he could think of. Finally, he used this one, "You have never given me a quarter for those machines." I was getting a little frustrated at this point, so I stopped right there in the middle of the parking lot. "You are absolutely right," I said. "I guess I must not love you." From the expression on David's face you would think I had said the sky was green or that chickens wore roller skates.

"What do you mean?" He said.

I shrugged. "I have never given you a quarter for one of those machines. That means I don't love you, right?"

At this point David burst out laughing. "That's silly!" he said. "Of course you love me!" You see although David was still a little guy, Judy and I had spent years telling him over and over again: no matter what I love you. You can be angry with me. I might be frustrated with you. We may not be happy with each other at any given moment. None of that makes any difference. No matter what, I will always love you. When you are an old man with grandchildren of your own, I will still love you.

When I suggested to David that because I did not give him what he wanted that meant I didn't love him, that wasn't threatening to David. That was a joke. It was laughable.

Since the dawn of creation, God has been saying over and over to us, "No matter what I will always love you. It doesn't matter if you are upset with me or I am a little frustrated with you. I will still love you." So if we don't get the things we want, to even think that somehow God doesn't love us is laughable. God's love is in no way connected with how many items we have received from our wish list.

Statement number 3: The proof of God's love does not rest on whether or not we feel or are aware of God's presence. I told you a story about David when he was little. Let me tell you one about my middle son, Jonathan. It happened when I was a student at seminary and Jon was just a toddler. One of our favorite spots in town was the Haagen-Dazs ice cream parlor. I think you can get Haagen-Dazs ice cream at Hy-Vee. If you have tried it you know it is very creamy, very rich delicious ice cream. Well, back east they have a chain of ice cream shops. Once in a while as a special treat on a student's budget we would splurge and go to Haagen-Dazs for a cone or a sundae.

One afternoon, when Jonathan was two, maybe three, he put his jacket on and said, "Bye! I'm going to Haagen-Dazs." And before I could say anything, he went running out the door. Now, I was curious. So I put on my jacket and followed him all the while staying out of sight. He never looked back. He went trucking up the street at a quick pace, in the right direction, and probably would have made the four miles across town, if I hadn't caught up with him and stopped him before he tried to cross the street.

Now the whole time he was completely unaware of my presence. He thought he left me at the apartment. If he had been a bit older he might have realized his situation and been frightened. I had hung back to see what he would do, if he would eventually give up and try to find his way home. But I was there all along, and whether he knew it or not, he was perfectly safe.

Sometimes it seems as if God is not around. We are unaware of God's presence. That does not mean God is not there. That does not mean God does not love us. Perhaps God is watching us, like I was watching little

Jonathan. Perhaps God is wondering if we will be able to find our way home. But we are not alone. God is not indifferent. He is there watching and loving us.

The proof of God's love does not lie in that we have somehow earned it. It is not connected to whether we get what we want. It is not related to whether or not we feel God's presence. But where is the proof? How do we know for certain that God does indeed love us? The proof is given to us by that same writer who tells us about Thomas. In the third chapter of John's first letter, it is laid out for us: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

Another translation says, "How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us..." The emphasis in the Greek is not only the great quantity of God's love, but also the great quality. The nature of God's love is so abundant and of such a supreme nature, that we are entitled to be called the children of God. If God merely liked us or was concerned about us, God might have just created us, maybe given us a few blessings and let it go at that. But God loves us, with a love of the greatest magnitude and finest quality. Because of that love, we become God's children.

We are touching this proof of God's love, every time we baptize someone like we will do with Thomas this morning. We are declaring that this child belongs not only to his parents and his family, but that this child belongs to God. John goes on to tell us a little of what that means to be a child of God. It is a bit of a mystery and we do not understand it all, but we do know one thing. John writes, "What we do know is this... we will be like him." That is how God loves us. God calls us his children, but God does not stop there. God turns us into little Jesus Christs.

So that is our proof, and it is proof we can see and touch. Look at others around you. Look at yourself. Whenever you see someone act a little bit like Jesus Christ; whenever you see someone love the unlovely, give sacrificially, or strive to show others a little of what God is like, they are demonstrating that they are God's children. They are turning into little Jesus Christs, thus proving that God's loves us. Whenever you find yourself holding on to the truth for truth's sake, or find yourself joyfully welcoming the outsider or the rejected or the weak and helpless, you are becoming a little more like Christ. It shows that you are a child of God. But it also shows just how much God loves you. There can be no doubt whatsoever. You can touch that. What more evidence could we possibly need?

When sad and terrible things happen in this world; when we face tragedy in our own lives it is extremely difficult to explain why God would allow such things to happen. Disasters, whether on a global or a personal scale will always astound us and shake us up a great deal. But it does seem that such tragedies also bring out the best of humanity. In the midst of horror and chaos, so many times people seemed to be transformed. They become heroes, demonstrating compassion, concern, sacrifice, and a total giving to others without a shred of selfishness. In short, they start to act like Jesus. They are children of God. They are tangible prove of the love of God.

In that upper room, so long ago, those disciples were pretty shaken up. Thomas is called the Doubter, but all eleven of those men had their share of doubts. Thomas represented all of them and all of us. There are so many things we do not know. There are many questions that have no answers. There is much that we face that can cause some serious doubts. We can so easily become frustrated and afraid. But there is something we do know for absolute certain. We are loved. I am loved. You are loved. And little Thomas Pumroy is loved. We know that God loves us, just as sure as Thomas knew the risen Christ was standing there before him. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen