

“REHABILITATING A REPUTATION”

Message for the Second Sunday of Easter

From Pastor Norman Staker

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ACTS 2: 14A, 22-32 ** 1 PETER 1: 3-9 ** JOHN 20: 19-31

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

A lady went into an ice cream shop in Beverly Hills, Ca. to buy an ice cream cone. She was shocked when Paul Newman walked in and stood right behind her. Although rattled, she was determined to maintain her composure. She paid for her ice cream cone, then confidently walked out. Outside, she realized she didn't have her cone. Not wanting to look foolish, she waited a few minutes before re-entering the store. When she didn't find her ice cream cone at the counter, she paused to contemplate where it could be. A soft tap on the shoulder interrupted her thoughts. She turned to find herself face to face with Paul Newman. He politely suggested that if she was looking for her ice cream cone, she might look in her purse. When Paul Newman showed up, he had an amazing impact on that lady. Famous people tend to have an impact on us.

As I was preparing this message for today, I came across an interesting article and the central idea behind it was this: that God can use anyone to start something incredible. And God can use ordinary people like us to do extraordinary ministry.

Does anybody here have a nickname that was given to them either back in grade school or high school or even since then, a nickname that has stuck? Nicknames have a way of focusing on one aspect of a person's appearance or character or on one incident in a person's life. Remember in history, we learned about Eric the Red, Richard the Lion-hearted, Mad King Ludwig; in church we sing about Good King Wenceslas.

That same kind of naming applies in our own life experience. A child fumbles the ball in a schoolyard football game and for a long time is known as 'Butterfingers.' The smallest kid in the neighborhood is tagged "Pee-Wee" and the name sticks.

The roughest kid in town is known as ‘Bruiser,’ at least to those afraid of him. Few people get to choose their nicknames and it’s likely that few people are happy with how they are named and known in this way. I knew a guy who got the nickname ‘Turkey’ later shortened to “Turk” because he got the starring role in a Thanksgiving play in the fifth grade. A lot of his cousins would mimic a turkey gobbling whenever they saw him. But he survived and actually became a pastor in the Southern Ohio Synod at a church named Bethel; yes, that was me and some cousins still call me Turk some 60 years later!

Many people doubted the existence of God; they still do today. Many people doubt the resurrection. On that first Easter, many years ago, one of the disciples refused to believe in the resurrection. He had doubts. Today we are going to take a look at that man, and see how his doubts are our doubts. We’re also going to see how Jesus healed this man of the disease of doubt, and how he heals us today.

Thomas would very likely be upset at the way he has been remembered. Thomas is a disciple who showed great loyalty and bravery. When Jesus announced that he was going back to Judea, even though people there had previously tried to stone him, Thomas is the first to say, “Let us go with him.” He was ready to stand by Jesus in the face of danger. Thomas is said to have brought Christianity eastward as far even as India. And yet, mention this disciple and most people will name him as ‘doubting Thomas.’

The perception is so well entrenched that we may not hear or see anything else in this exciting and important story about the risen Christ appearing to his disciples. Thomas as we know wasn’t with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared. The Gospel tells us they were hiding behind locked doors. Their teacher had been arrested, tried, and executed. Their world had been shaken, and they were afraid for their own lives.

Have you ever wondered where Thomas was? Maybe he wasn’t as scared as the others. He does join them later and hears their report that they have seen the Lord. The conversation immediately flows to Thomas saying that he needs to see the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands and the wound in his side. Nothing else is said about why in the voices, but we can consider that in asking to see the nail marks and the wound, Thomas was no more disbelieving than the rest of the disciples after hearing the women tell of their experience at the empty tomb. The others had heard Mary Magdalene’s account of meeting the risen Christ, but her story hadn’t convinced them. They were still hiding.

There's something quite wonderful in the interaction between Jesus and Thomas. It is a great reassurance to us with our own questions and hesitations that Jesus does not rebuke Thomas when he asks to see the nail marks and the wound. Thomas is expressing a heartfelt need. Jesus' first words spoken in this second appearance to his disciples are the same words spoken earlier to this group of shaken and fearful men: "Peace be with you." Not words of accusation or condemnation, but words of blessing and benediction.

You and I might hear the words of Jesus spoken gently and lovingly, encouraging Thomas to move forward in his quest for reassurance. Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." In that same tone and manner, without rebuke or condemnation, Jesus offers invitation and encouragement, "Do not doubt, but believe."

Consider the impact of Jesus on history. Someone has pointed out: "Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40, and Jesus for only 3, yet the influence of Christ's 3 year ministry is greater than the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching from these men who were among the greatest philosophers of all time. Jesus painted no pictures; yet, some of the finest paintings of Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him. Jesus wrote no poetry; but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Him. Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach, and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in His praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by Jesus Christ."

Jesus has influenced our world and He wants to influence our lives. What happens when Jesus shows up in your life? Again, listen to the words from our text this morning: "Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And 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."

When Jesus showed up everything was different.

We are all familiar with the term “doubting Thomas,” because Thomas doubted Jesus rose from the dead. Would you have believed such a story? The Bible never describes Thomas this way. It describes his moment of doubt. But it is one moment, only one, and he moves quickly beyond it. His identity, despite our perception and description of him, is not rooted in that moment. Thomas has been over branded through the years, similar to this Texas rancher:

There is a story that a Texas rancher bought 10 ranches and put them together to form one giant spread. His friend asked him the name of his new mega-ranch. He replied, "It's called The Circle Q, Rambling Brook, Double Bar, Broken Circle, Crooked Creek, Golden Horseshoe, Lazy B, Bent Arrow, Sleepy T, Triple O Ranch."

"Wow," said his friend, "I bet you have a lot of cattle."

"Not really," explained the rancher. "Not many survive the branding."

The story of Thomas is very similar to many of our emotional lives. When the Lord changes something in our lives, we become very determined in following that call. However, if we were left to our determination, we would all soon become prideful and arrogant, believing our determination caused the fulfillment of that calling. God will allow circumstances to come “interrupt” our calling so we grow more dependent upon Him. He will allow us to realize we are not capable of fully understanding our calling, as well as showing us we don't have all the qualifications for that calling.

Remember, as a friend once told me, “God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called.” We will immediately realize there will be times we don't know which way to go, or what road to go down. This is usually the turning point in many peoples spiritual lives. When they get to the point of “I don't know,” many times they will reverse course and follow the road they do know. Following the “I know the way” route will always end up in the truck stop of brokenness. If we will work through and wait upon the Lord during those times of unknowing it will help get us through the next stage.

On Easter night, the disciples were together in a house, hiding behind locked doors. A number of them had seen Jesus alive, and now they were scared. What were the Jewish leaders going to do? Would they be arrested now? Would they be accused of stealing the body? Would anyone believe them if they told people that

Jesus had risen from the dead? They were hiding from the Pharisees and Sadducees – hoping to avoid confrontation.

Suddenly, Jesus was standing in the middle of them, and said to them, “Peace be with you.” Jesus always says just the right thing at the right time, doesn’t he. He tells them that they can feel peace in their hearts. He was there, and they had nothing to worry about. He showed them his hands and side to prove to them that he wasn’t a ghost, but that he was the same Jesus they had known, the same Jesus they had seen crucified just three days earlier.

The Apostle Thomas wasn’t there. When he returned, the disciples told him that Jesus had appeared to them. But Thomas didn’t believe: “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” You can’t get much more skeptical than that, can you. I will not believe, unless I see visible proof.

Why does Thomas refuse to believe? Because Thomas was a practical person, and he lived in a practical world. He was shattered on Good Friday when Jesus died. But he wasn’t about to succumb to fantasy. Dead was dead, and that was it. No one in their right minds would doubt it when the Romans said a prisoner was dead. They were experts at killing! It’s not that Thomas didn’t want to believe that Jesus was still alive. But Thomas knew how the world worked. Dead was dead, and that was it.

That’s how our world sees Jesus’ resurrection today. Nice idea, but it didn’t really happen. Many people are set on proving that the resurrection of Jesus was a spiritual resurrection. Jesus arose only in the sense that his spirit goes marching on, sort of life the way the spirit of Abraham Lincoln continues to influence America.

It is always so. The Easter victory is the victory of the Resurrection. Out of despair comes hope. Up from weakness comes strength. In the midst of pain, there is peace. Sorrow is turned into joy. In place of death, there is life.

With all of us in our times of deepest need is the risen Christ. In Him is the Easter victory that overcomes the world.

Only Jesus could pull this off. If somebody popped up in the middle of my bedroom at night and said, “peace be with you!”, I’d probably jump through the ceiling. But it wasn’t Jesus’ purpose to startle them. It was His purpose to assure them that he had everything under control. Once they saw who it was that was with

them, they could rest easy. Jesus, their master, their leader, and as Thomas later on said, their “God”, was still with them, stronger than ever. They could rest easy knowing that Jesus was protecting them. They didn’t need to fear anything anymore. They could be at peace.

The main thing to remember is this- Jesus is alive and well. He’s living in your living room. He’s living at your school. Jesus is living with you at work. He’s in charge of Iran, the USA, and every other country in the world. You may not be able to hear Him, but He’s saying, “Peace be with you! Relax, I’m here. I haven’t gone anywhere. Even if there is a nuclear war going on around you, there’s no reason to be afraid. I’m protecting you.” This is not a cliché. This is not a nice saying that never comes true. This is not a politician telling you, “I’m protecting you.” This is your Almighty God who rose from the dead saying to you, “peace be with you.” The Almighty God is telling you to relax; it’s all ok. He’s got it all under control.

I encourage you to celebrate the resurrection presence of Christ today and every day for: Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

Amen.