

## **Courage and Vulnerability**

**A Sermon by James R. Newby**

**Text: John 20:19-28**

You know the story...Following the crucifixion, the disciples were locked in a house for fear that they too will be killed, licking their wounded spirits and trying to figure out what had gone wrong. And then, as recorded in John, “Jesus came and stood among them.” To prove that it was their Lord, Jesus showed them the scars in his hands and side...And all rejoiced.

For some reason, Thomas was not with them, and so the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas replied, and these are the words that earn him his nickname as “Doubting Thomas,” “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

As the story goes, a week later Jesus appeared again in the house, and this time Thomas was with them. Jesus turned to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” And Thomas did what was requested, and exclaimed, “My Lord and my God.”

There are two things in this story that stand out for me, both of which have to do with vulnerability. *First is the courage that Thomas showed by his doubting, thus making him vulnerable to ridicule from his believing colleagues.*

While living in Des Moines, Iowa, I would meet every other Saturday for breakfast with four other men. Pooling our creative juices, we began calling ourselves, “The Group of Five!” During one of our times together, one of the group stated that while growing up within his Christian tradition, he felt that to doubt was to reject. Many have felt, and continue to feel this way. To be called a “Doubting Thomas” was and is not considered a good thing! As we would sit around that breakfast table every other Saturday morning, we learned from one another and recognized that to doubt was not to reject, but to honor the process of questioning. We learned the truth that *life is a series of questions with answers that no longer fit.* As we grow spiritually, the journey of faith will not necessarily bring us to answers, but our questions will become more profound.

For Thomas, the crucifixion had destroyed his hope. In the courageous act of doubting, Thomas put his hands into the nail prints and into Jesus’ side, thus moving him to exclaim, “My Lord and my God!” A new transformative experience of God took place, and a new paradigm of understanding the work of God in the world was beginning to unfold. Spiritual growth is a fluid process, and there is always more to learn and to discover.

*The second aspect of this story that I find so meaningful is the vulnerability that Jesus displays by openly showing his disciples his scars.* Here is the post-Easter Christ, and he is still carrying the scars of the crucifixion.

There is an important lesson here. *Life is an accumulation of scars, both physical and emotional. Healing the wounds of our lives is a continuous process of growing in our ability to allow love into our injured hearts and souls.* Here is the point: There will always be a scar to remind us of the pain which accompanied such a wound. Here in the safety of this small company of persons that Jesus had come to trust and love, he becomes vulnerable by showing his scars. It is this kind of love and vulnerability that makes working through our pain possible. We will never be free of pain, for it is a basic ingredient of life. Each pain experienced carries a special place in our hearts not to be forgotten, for the scars will always remind us. This is one of the essential ways we learn and grow in our human quest for spiritual intimacy. By sharing our scars with trusted friends within a beloved community, we can move from being immobilized by our pain, to being emboldened by it, evoking us into new life and growth. This is how we become *real*.

I love what Lizzie, the daughter in the play, the *Rainmaker*, says about her father. I have shared this before...She is speaking to a friend and says, “Some nights I am in the kitchen washing dishes, and Pop is playing poker with the boys.

Well, I'll watch him real close, and at first, I'll just see an ordinary, middle-age man, not very interesting to look at. And then, minute by minute I'll see things I never saw before—good things and bad things, strange little habits I never noticed he had, ways of talking I'd never paid any mind to. Suddenly, I know who he is, and I love him so much I could cry, and ***I thank God I took the time to see him real.***”

I thank God that Thomas had the courage to doubt and took the time to see the *real* Jesus of the crucifixion and resurrection—*the one with scars*. You have your doubts, and I have mine... You have your scars, some visible and some invisible, and I have mine. As I continue on my path of spiritual growth, I want to be sensitive to the *real* within each person, doubts, scars and all. I am convinced that one of the ways that we can experience the Living Light of Christ is in this place of *relationship and authenticity*.