

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“CHANGED LIVES – THOMAS”
John 20:19-31
March 30, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. Services**

There are some people who are very disturbed about so-called conflicts between science and religion. On this Sunday when we remember Thomas, the famous doubter, this would be a good time to talk about those people who still think we can get along without God, as well as those people who would rather get along without science. But first let's look at our story.

The setting is after Jesus' resurrection. It was a Sunday evening. The disciples were meeting in a house with the doors locked for fear of their enemies. Suddenly Jesus came and stood among them and said, ***“Peace be with you!”*** Then he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed, as you might imagine.

After this, he said to them a second time, ***“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”*** And with that he breathed on them and said, ***“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”***

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ***“We have seen the Lord!”***

But he said to them, ***“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.”***

A week later the disciples were gathered in the house again, and this time, Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus again came and stood among them and said, *“Peace be with you!”* Then he said to Thomas, *“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*

Thomas said to him, *“My Lord and my God!”*

Then Jesus told him, *“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

It’s a beautiful story about an honest and devoted disciple for whom the resurrection seemed simply too good to be true. He could not believe until he saw for himself. Each time we read this story, it gives us the opportunity to remind ourselves that it’s all right to doubt. That’s why God gave us a brain. God wants us to wrestle with the meaning of life and faith. This is the way God works to create souls worthy to dwell with Him in paradise.

In our Bible study last year, we talked about the doubts that plagued Mother Teresa all her ministry. Most of us understand about those doubts. If we had witnessed all the suffering that Mother Teresa witnessed, we would wonder where God was, too. But she never gave up serving God. That’s the important thing. She never stopped serving.

Henry Drummond summed up the difference between unbelief and doubt in this way: **“Christ himself never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is can’t believe; unbelief is won’t believe. Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is being content with darkness.”**

Some of the greatest saints who have ever lived struggled with doubt. In fact, the more committed you are to serving God, the more intensely you will struggle with the things of faith. Persons for whom faith is nominal never struggle. That’s because they don’t really care. But, if you really care, if you are really seeking to give up everything to follow Christ, you are

going to wrestle with the meaning of it all as well as the reality of it all.

Thomas really wanted to serve Christ.

There is another incident in the New Testament when Thomas is prominent, this time before Jesus went to the cross. After the raising of Lazarus, Jesus' announced that he had to go to Jerusalem. The disciples were disturbed. Jesus' enemies were gathering in Jerusalem. There was great danger there, danger that finally resulted in his crucifixion. But remember, it was Thomas who said, "***Let us go also that we may die with him.***" (John 11:16) Thomas didn't have a nominal faith. He really cared. And so he struggled, as many great saints since have struggled.

One of the issues that many people struggle with is the relationship between science and faith. Today, right here in America, there is a real effort by some Christian leaders to have schools teach a subject called, "**Intelligent Design.**" The rationale for this is that there are some people who believe that science, as it is being taught in many schools--particularly the teaching of evolution--undermines belief in God. Teachers of Intelligent Design want equal time. They want to show that, properly understood; the evidence from science supports the idea of a divine Creator. It's an issue that will not go away.

But this morning, I would like to offer us a couple of principles that might help if you are one of those who struggle with such questions. It may prove particularly helpful to our young people.

The first principle is that science deals with "how," faith deals with "why"--and there really is no conflict between the two. Anything that is true is true. God is a God of truth. If science says that the universe is 14 million years old and that turns out to be true, it's true. That's how long God took in fashioning life. If God used evolution to achieve His goal, so be it. Science deals with **how**; faith deals with **why**.

There are some people who believe that everything happened by chance. If you get into a discussion with someone like this, don't get bent out of shape. They've been taught that this is an enormous universe, and that in a

universe of such enormity, anything is possible. And they're right. This is an enormous universe. But our God is larger than the universe. We don't serve a small God.

Now think about this; if one believes that we simply evolved by blind chance, how would you explain beauty? Why do our eyes and brain not see in black and white? That's all we need for survival, that's all evolution should have given us. Yet we live in a world of incredible beauty. Why? And why are we so constructed that such beauty satisfies something deep down in our soul? Who has not been taken aback by the beauty of a sunset? Nature is an amazing force indeed if we came to this place by chance.

And how do you explain four-part harmony? I know that seems frivolous, but think about it. Four-part harmony is certainly not required for survival. Oh, to be sure, it is helpful to hear a range of pitches, but why do our voices make such a wide array of sounds and why, when those voices are blended, can they make such an awe-inspiring sound? Alto, soprano, deep, deep bass, tenor--we've all heard music that has transported us right to the portal of heaven. The Hallelujah Chorus that we sang last week ought to win over the most cynical skeptic! Chance? I don't think so.

Science tells us **how**; faith tells us **why**. Scientists, no matter how brilliant they are, are merely mechanics. They're tinkering with the machinery God has created. They're discovering new things all the time, and I'm glad! That's what God intends for them to do. Their role is just like yours, and mine--to improve life upon earth. But when some scientist says pompously, there is no God, he or she has stepped out from science and has entered the arena of faith. In fact, I can say to you that there is nothing science can discover that ought to shake our faith.

One sincere believer said that if they were ever to find the body of Jesus, then all Christianity would come tumbling down. He was trying to express the importance of the resurrection. But he's wrong.

Last year *The National Geographic* reported that a group of scientists had discovered the tomb of Jesus and his family. But the evidence was too

flimsy to be taken seriously. It was the worst kind of sensationalism. But, even if they had discovered Christ's tomb, that would not be the end of the world. St. Paul said in **I Corinthians 15** that at death we throw off our physical bodies and put on new spiritual bodies. Notice in the story of Thomas, Jesus was able to appear to the disciples **behind locked doors**. The doors were not a barrier to his resurrected body. How would Paul know about the new spiritual body unless he had heard from the apostles' report about Christ's appearances? Jesus had a body, but it was not exactly the same body he was crucified with. A physical body does not go through closed doors.

The important point is that there is nothing in the physical world that can destroy our faith. Don't let anyone mislead you. Science deals with **how**; faith deals with **why**.

Here's the second important principle: there are two kinds of truth in the Bible--historical truth and spiritual truth. When the writer of Genesis wrote about the creation of the world and said that it occurred in six days, and God rested on the seventh, he wasn't giving a historical chronology. If you want to know how long it took, ask a mechanic, ask a scientist. The writer of Genesis was writing about two spiritual truths. One was, of course, that God created everything; everything there is. ***"God spoke and there was light!"***

The second is the importance of the Sabbath. God worked six days and rested on the seventh and so should we, God's people. The Sabbath rest was a very important principle for the Hebrew people. It ought to be more important to us. But the Bible is a mixture of historical truth and spiritual truth. The important thing is that God speaks through this book, and we need to heed what God says. If we try to make the Bible into something it is not, we make our faith look foolish.

Back in the 1600s most people believed, quite naturally, that the sun revolved around the earth. The sun rises and the sun sets, so naturally it must revolve around the earth. Then there came a man named Galileo who said that was not so. Well, religious people were in arms. After all Psalm

93:1, Psalm 96:10, and Chronicles 16:30 all include text stating that *“the world is firmly established, it cannot be moved.”* In the same tradition, Psalm 104:5 says, *“[the Lord] set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.”* Further, Ecclesiastes 1:5 states that *“the sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.”*

Galileo claimed that it was never his intent to dispute the Bible. In fact, he said, this was not contrary to those Scripture passages. He took Augustine’s position on Scripture: that we should not take every passage literally, particularly when the Scripture in question is a book of poetry and songs, not a book of instructions or history.

We don’t compare apples and oranges. There is historical truth and there is spiritual truth. There are parts of the Bible that are poetry, parts that are parable. These are intertwined with historical narrative. It’s difficult even for scholars to separate the two. Science tells **how**; faith tells **why**. There is historical truth and there is spiritual truth.

Here’s the final thing that I would share with you this morning: we walk by faith, not knowledge. St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, *“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face . . .”* And it’s true. There is very little certainty in this world. Notice Jesus’ words in response to Thomas’ acclamation of faith. Jesus told him, *“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

That’s a powerful statement. *“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

Woody Allen, the comedian, asked why God couldn’t give us some kind of sign that He exists, like depositing a million dollars in a Swiss bank account in his name. That’s not the way God works. Any of you who have ever sat beside the bed of a loved one in a time of crisis know that God sometimes hides Himself from us. **Why?** I don’t know. Again, maybe it’s because that is the only way God could help us grow spiritually into souls worthy to spend eternity with Him. People who do not struggle with their faith remain forever spiritual adolescents. The important thing is this: all

saints of God go through times of doubt. But do not let the world mislead you.

**“This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.
This is my Father’s world: I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;
His hand the wonders wrought.
This is my Father’s world, the birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker’s praise.
This is my Father’s world: He shines in all that’s fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass;
He speaks to me everywhere.”**

Psychologist Gary Greenburg, tells of sitting with his seven-year-old son, marveling at the beauty of a giant Ichneumon fly, which is a huge wasp-like insect. And as they consult the encyclopedia about the mysterious creature, they learn about the amazingly intricate and bloody process by which it reproduces, and in their amazement and wonder, ask: **“How can this be?”**

“Isn’t it amazing,” Gary Greenburg asks his son, **“that all of this could happen by accident?”** Then Gary Greenberg realized the absurdity of his own question. He began a spiritual quest seeking to answer the question whether there might be not only a design to the universe, but also a designer.*

Of course, there is a Designer. Who could doubt it? Science tells us **how**; faith tells us **why**. There are historical truths and there is spiritual truth. We walk by faith, not knowledge. Jesus said to Thomas: **“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

I hope you believe that I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.

* Gary Greenburg, “Intelligent Designs.” *Brain, Child*; Winter, 2006. Cited by Jeff Vamos,

