

## Saying “Never” to God is Never a Good Idea

2<sup>nd</sup> Sun. of Easter – 04/07/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: John 20:19-31 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 20, “[Jesus] showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”

v. 25, “But [Thomas] said to them, ‘Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe’.”

v.29, “Jesus said..., ‘...Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’.”

### Introduction

✘ Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

✘ It’s pretty easy for us Christians here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to hear Thomas say, “Unless I see...I will never believe” and then point at him with our jaws a gape in shock and disgust and think, “How terrible. How appalling that anyone would ever say ‘never’ to God like that.”

→ And yet I stand before you this morning as one who has been very guilty of that sin. It was somewhere around 36 years ago, when the vicar out our home congregation in Boulder asked me, standing outside his office door one day, “Hey Keith, have you ever thought about being a pastor?”

→ And because I was a died-in-the-wool native Coloradoan, who also had seen my brother as a pastor treated so poorly by two different congregations, and years earlier had dropped out of college to work in business management, I quickly answered, “Vicar Larson, there are three things I will never do. I will never leave Colorado, I will never go back to college, and I will never ever be a pastor!”

✘ Well, approximately two years later, after the subsequent vicar also encouraged me to consider the pastoral office – whom I am convinced was challenged by the guy before him to “keep working on Keith”, Mary Beth and I, along with our two young children, packed up a U-haul headed to Nebraska where I would begin six years of studies toward becoming a pastor.

→ But on the way out of Colorado, we spent our first night at my parent’s house in Fort Collins where I sat in the living room with my Dad, a very faithful Christian man whom I admired greatly. And my Dad said, “Keith, I just don’t think you guys are going to be able to make it work financially through the next six years of college.” He didn’t use the word “never” but the doubt was oozing out of his mouth with every word that he spoke.

✘ Yet the next morning, we climbed up into that U-haul together with Mary Beth, my Mom and the kids in the car behind us and we headed out of Colorado, back to school for six more years, and here I am today, after 27 years of serving in absolutely the best job on this planet; a pastor in Christ’s Church.

→ But I’m here to tell you from firsthand experience, folks it is never a good idea to say “never” to God or about God.

✘ There are so many uncertainties in our world and in our lives today – the stability of our economy; the status of peace between countries, within our families, among our neighbors and co-workers and schoolmates; the condition of our health and our marriages and our own mental stability and so much more.

→ It seems like so many things are out of our hands, that we find ourselves grasping – struggling for any kind of control that we can have in this life. And so, we hang on with every

ounce of our being, to those things that feel comfortable; those ideas that seem safe; that future that looks to have the easiest, most logical path forward.

→ And if anyone dares to challenge any of those things that we believe we've got all figured out; especially if it's something as radical as, let's say an all-powerful God creating the entire universe and all of nature, including every living being in just six 24-hour days or even more radical, the idea that someone who has been nailed to a cross and pierced with a spear through the heart and buried in a tomb for three days...coming back to life in the same body in perfect health, well...then not only Thomas, but I would say pretty much every one of us in this room would be quick to say some version, of "I will never believe it" or "It could never happen."

✘ But Jesus calls you and me and all people here in this text from Holy Scripture to take those doubts; those concerns; those questions; to take those earthly-based certainties and self-determined convictions about your future, and place them all in the hands of Jesus instead!

→ For Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

## I. Doubt and Fear in My Hands

✘ You see, Thomas and all of Jesus' disciples at the time of Jesus' death and resurrection, teach us a great deal from their words and actions in today's Gospel Reading.

→ The number one lesson actually convicts us of our sin. It is the sin of thinking that "we've got it all under control"; that "we've got everything figured out". And watch out people, because the moment that you say, "Oh no..., I would never in a million years pretend to say that I've got everything figured out", guess what you just did? You just used the word "never" in telling God that you will never become too proud, or too confident in life. You are saying that in every single aspect of life, you will always live for and love the Lord your God with all of your heart; all of your soul and all of your mind every day for the rest of your life.

→ And that, if it were possible, would mean that you never ever have any worries; never ever have any fears or concerns or moments of doubt – about anything!

✘ Just look at these disciples. They were very faithful men – handpicked by Jesus and trained firsthand by Jesus Himself. Yet even after Jesus told them He would suffer, die, be buried and then rise on the third day, verse 19 tells us they were hiding behind locked doors in fear!

→ These men who said, We will never "deny You" Jesus (Mt. 26:35); believing they had this faith thing all figured out, have now learned what happens when any person believes that he's got it all in hand.

→ Two things inevitably show up: fear and doubt! "No, not me," you might say, "I'm not afraid of anything; I don't have any doubts." Really, what about those times when you end up being wrong? Or are you so afraid of being wrong that you will deny it all the way to your death?

✘ Thomas shows us how this works. When he said, "Unless I see in [Jesus'] hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe," what was Thomas' great fear?

→ He was afraid that God; that Jesus was right. Because if God is right, you see, what's that mean for me? It means that 1) I lose control over my life. 2) I have to then turn from my sinful attitude and ways, and actually live for Jesus first instead of myself first. And 3) It means that I am not always right. 4) If God is right, it means I will end up in uncomfortable situations in this world; times when unbelievers will tease me or hate me or challenge me because of my faith. But most of all, if God is right 5) it means that I can no longer ride the fence – either I believe and trust in Him completely or I remain in my unbelief.

- This is what Thomas was facing; what you and I face every day in our struggle with the attitudes and pressures of this world; in the battle with our own sinful desires.
- ✘ I will never forgive that person for what he/she did to me; I will never engage with them as long as they believe that; I will never consider that career or that move or that teaching in the Bible because I can never let God be God over everything, including everything that I believe I've got control of with my own hands.

## II. Peace, Forgiveness & Victory in Jesus' Hands

- ✘ But did you notice what Jesus did in response to His disciples' fear and Thomas' unbelief? He didn't just let them be. He didn't just brush them off as lost souls.
  - No, in each case (vv. 19, 26) "although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them." It was crucial, not only that His resurrection be something that they heard about from an angel or one of the women. It was crucial that they saw in the flesh with their very own eyes that Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*
  - And that's not all. Jesus turned their focus away from what they believed they could control and carry in their hands, to show them whose hands and whose side really carried their sins into the spiritual battle with Satan and death.
- ✘ On Easter night, Jesus "showed them His hands and His side" (v. 20) and then with Thomas a week later He said, "Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side" (v.27). These are the hands that truly have everything under control; that bore your sins and mine; that were pierced to the point of death because that's the required penalty for any and all sin. This is the side that took the spear head all the way up and into the heart. Yes, this is the heart that loves His disciples; that loves you and me even as we cower in fear; even as we foolishly claim we will never believe or follow God and His will in every aspect of our lives.
  - Did you notice what happened each time that the reality of Jesus' hands and side, pierced yet now alive again in front of them took ahold of those men? Thomas couldn't contain himself so that he proclaimed aloud, "My Lord and my God!" (v.29).
- ✘ It's then that Jesus taught them the true and lasting result of His death and resurrection. Three times in this text Jesus says, "Peace be with you" (vv.19, 21, 26). Oh, what a relief that must have been; what a relief it is for you and me here today. The absolute assurance that in spite of our fear and doubt, Jesus still loves us! Not only that, the guarantee that our relationship with our Heavenly Father is fully repaired and we are at peace with Him forever.
  - And miracle of miracles, look at what Jesus does with these guys in verses 21-23. He has conquered and covered and carried their sin and fears and doubts so perfectly that He now breathes out upon them the Holy Spirit and He makes them the first pastors in His newly formed Christian Church.
  - I know, just think about how dramatic of a change Jesus has created within these guys. Talk about doing the impossible; He turned these "cowering-in-fear-behind-locked-doors and never-believing-in-that" guys into His "you can't stop me from proclaiming Jesus" pastors! Jesus even gave them the authority to proclaim His forgiveness upon all sinners who repent and to withhold that same forgiveness from those who refuse to believe.
- ✘ And now today, my dear friends, the firsthand witness of these early pastors; these first-Easter participants comes to you and me in the God-breathed and Spirit-inspired account written in God's Word.
  - The assurance of new life coming about from death for us today is based upon what? Though all of the symbols of new life have their place among the wonders of God's Creation; the

flowers sprouting and the buds bursting and the little chicks poking out of the eggs, those are only secondary witnesses.

→ The real confidence and peace and forgiveness and victory that Thomas and the disciples received from Jesus came from what? From the witness of Jesus Himself standing there alive in front of them; from the still open wounds in His hands and His side – the fact that He died in our place and now He lives as our Lord and our God!

✘ Knowing now that those hands have already dealt with any and every fear or doubt that we might ever face – that’s the definition of true peace in this world; of eternal peace and confidence to face any challenge; any difficulty or fear with the confidence of Jesus Himself with us.

→ That side; those hands - they are the real signs and promises of new life for us today. They point us to the assurance that Jesus promised for us when He said to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (v.29).

→ Is that you? Do you believe today, my dear Christians? “Yes!” Do you believe that, Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Then be at peace, in the name of Jesus, Amen.