

My Lord and My God!

It's the week after Easter. So, where are you in the faith spectrum? Suspicious? Confused? Unconvinced? Wondering what it's all about?



Michael K. Olmsted

Consider the Apostle Thomas. He was one of Jesus' inner circle of twelve disciples, a devout Jew longing for God's promised Messiah to show up and make good on all those Old Testament promises. More than a lesson about Thomas "the doubter," this is about God's love. This cannot be squeezed into a satisfactory philosophical idea and transcends our rational limits and a lifetime in this physical world.

I have always liked Thomas because he would not be satisfied with someone else's explanation. He was in search of something more than ancient prophecies and emotional hopes. He wanted what Jesus promised: a new kind of life based on God's unfailing love. Why Thomas had not been present when Jesus previously appeared to the other disciples, we do not know. His words do not suggest he "doubted" but that he longed for the ultimate truth: "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" (v. 25). Our world has a multitude of religious and philosophical organizations, traditions, and writings, but there is only one Son of God: the Jesus who came back from death to remind us the God who created life has never forgotten us. Beyond the world's clever ideas and empty promises there is the love of God which cannot be kept out by any of our locked doors!

As we consider those fearful disciples hiding behind locked doors in Jerusalem, let's remember we are much like them. Our world often dismisses faith in God, ignores institutional religion, and sees the gospel as a cultural fairy tale. Jesus' name alone signals what the gospel is all about. "Jesus" comes from the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua" which means "the Lord saves." "Joshua" comes from the root *yasha*, which means to redeem, deliver, release, or set free. Jesus came to open the door between the hopeless darkness of this world to a different life of hope,

meaning, and joy in the grace of God.

For Jesus, the locked doors behind which the apostles gathered were no more a barrier than death had already placed before him. It is always easier to define barriers than to get beyond them. But this "Thomas event" declares that God's love overcomes all things. Jesus appeared in that locked upper room, no key required, and said to Thomas: "You asked, so here I am, wounds and all. It's time to come out from behind your doubts and decide whether you believe or not!" (vv. 26-27, MKO paraphrase). Thomas' answer is definitive: "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28).

This dramatic encounter was not for Thomas alone, but for the other disciples who were locked into uncertainty and fear, and for us as we face the challenges and fears of our day. In terms of the four gospels, we are at the conclusion of the first chapter of the Jesus story, but Acts comes next, the dramatic spread of the good news across the known world and eventually into our modern world. Jesus' response to Thomas' declaration of faith reveals a future those earliest disciples could not see: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v. 29).

In the last 2,000 years, in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, persecution, prejudice, wars, selfishness, and religious imaginings, countless millions have come to believe in Jesus. This passage does not deal with the never-ending work of God's Spirit, but the promise is very clear: Jesus said to those fearful disciples: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And he breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any they, they are retained" (v. 23). That English translation does not actually teach that we will take over God's role in deciding a person's spiritual fate, but that God's Spirit can use our witness to draw people to his love and grace.

Our calling is to be God's church, to clearly speak the message of grace and live daily as an example of God's love. Sadly, the church visible has too often constructed doctrinal and organizational

barriers to the message of Christ.

This story reminds us that God's love is open to every generation. Obviously we were not alive when Jesus walked on this earth, but we have the biblical record and the history of the good news reaching into the whole world. The history of Christianity records the tragic mistakes made by the institutional church – but also the tremendous positive difference the gospel has made for so many. We do well to return to the story of Jesus daily, to measure our actions, to examine our beliefs, and to recommit our lives to Christ.

Acts and the New Testament letters inspire us as we see how the church spread in spite of continuing social and government obstacles. The first disciples did not remain locked in an upper room in Jerusalem. The Easter story begins with the darkness on a hill outside Jerusalem, then spreads throughout Judea, to the outer edges of the Roman Empire, and even to Ethiopia. Today the hope of Christ has reached beyond forbidding regional barriers, powerful religious opposition, and horrible persecution. So remember Jesus' words: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (v. 21).

Like those first disciples we must not lock ourselves away in our safe churches, celebrating our faith and correct doctrines. We need to open the doors of our heart, pray earnestly for God's direction and strength, and commit ourselves to sharing the hope of Christ beyond all the barriers of social expectation, false doctrines, and political attitudes.

When Jesus appeared in that locked room he greeted those fearful and uncertain disciples: "Peace (Shalom) be with you" (v.19) – may the comfort and fear-dispelling presence of God fill your heart and mind. The Apostle Paul, who knew the dangers and opposition of the world often heaps on God's people, clearly declares our ultimate source of strength: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Matthew 28:19 defines our ultimate purpose, to go and make disciples of all nations.

Today's text is not a blueprint for professional ministers and missionaries: it is our purpose as the people of God to point the world to ultimate hope in the present and forever.