SERMON · MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN CHURCH, SANTA CRUZ AREA

The Theology of the Scar: A Sermon for Thomas Sunday

Second Sunday of Easter · April 12, 2026
Readings: Acts 2:14a, 22–32 · Psalm 16 · 1 Peter 1:3–9 · John 20:19–31

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Grace and peace to you from the one who was, and is, and is to come—the one who meets us behind our locked doors.

I have to start with a confession: today is a bit ironic for me. Today is “Thomas Sunday,” and as someone named Thomas, I’ve spent a lifetime living in the shadow of a nickname: "Doubting Thomas."

For centuries, the Church has used my namesake as a cautionary tale—a man with a "weak faith muscle," a man who stayed home when he should have been at church, a man who demanded proof before he’d offer praise.

But as I’ve learned Lutheran theology, and as someone who has lived a real life in a difficult world, I’ve come to love this man. Because Thomas was the only one in the room who refused to settle for a "Theology of Glory."

You see, we often live under the heavy weight of a **Theology of Glory**. This is the belief that faith is a steady climb upward. It’s the idea that if we just pray harder, study more, and "cultivate" our belief, we will achieve a state of certainty where life makes sense. In this view, **doubt is a failure, and suffering is a riddle to be solved.**

Modern writers like John Ortberg often describe faith as a **muscle**. The idea is that we exercise our trust, stretching it through resistance until it grows strong. And in the gym of daily life, there is some truth to that. We do learn. We do grow. But here is the problem with the "muscle" theory: muscles tear. Muscles fatigue. And when life becomes truly difficult—when the diagnosis is terminal, when the marriage fails, when the "easy answers" of Sunday morning don't fit the "hard reality" of Tuesday night—that muscle snaps.

If your faith is a muscle, what happens when you are too paralyzed by grief to flex it?

This is where Thomas enters the room. Thomas was experiencing what Martin Luther called ***Anfechtung***—a soul-shaking struggle where God feels absent and the world feels cruel. Thomas had seen his friend tortured and executed. He wasn't looking for a "spiritual principle" or a "growth mindset." He was looking for the truth.

- You could argue that we don't "cultivate" faith like a garden; we **suffer** faith.
- Faith is what is left over when our easy answers have burned away. It isn't something we bring to God; it's what God rescues from the wreckage of our certainty

Instead of *working to cultivate faith*, consider this: **The "work" is actually the honesty of our despair.** When we admit that life is difficult and there are no easy answers, we are finally "doing" the Theology of the Cross. We are "calling a thing what it is".

- When we stop trying to manufacture "easy answers," we stop building a Theology of Glory.
- It is in that void—the "I can't do this"—where the Holy Spirit breathes..

Thomas makes a demand that sounds skeptical, but is actually deeply faithful. He says, *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were... I will not believe."* Notice what he asks for. He doesn't ask to see Jesus' crown. He doesn't ask to see a miracle. He asks for the **scars.**

Thomas was searching for a **Theology of the Cross.** He knew that a God without scars cannot help a world with scars. He refused to believe in a "Glorious Jesus" who had forgotten the Friday pain. He needed to know that the God who rose from the dead was the same God who bled in the dirt. As one theologian beautifully put it: *"Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."* In fact, doubt is often our soul's way of refusing to settle for a cheap version of God.

And how does Jesus respond? He doesn't scold Thomas for having a weak muscle. He doesn't tell him to go "work" on his belief. No—Jesus intrudes. He walks right through the locked doors of Thomas's fear and offers Himself.

Jesus says, *"Put your finger here; see my hands."* In that moment, the "work" of faith ends and the "gift" of faith begins. Luther famously taught that faith is not a work we do; it is an **empty hand.** Faith is simply the vacancy that God fills. As Luther said, *"Faith is a living,*

daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man would stake his life on it a thousand times." But that confidence doesn't come from our strength—it comes from the **object** of our faith.

Thomas's empty, shaking hand was reached out, and Jesus filled it with His own wounded flesh.

And this brings us to why we are here today. We live in a world where there are no easy answers. **Life is hard, and the "muscle" of our belief is often exhausted.** We might feel guilty that we can't "see" Jesus like Thomas did. We might feel like we are failing because we still have questions.

But look at what happens next. Jesus says, *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* That is not a rebuke. It is a promise. It is a promise for you. It means that Jesus knows the "gap" you are living in. He knows you are sitting in a locked room of uncertainty. And just as He came to Thomas, He comes to you.

But He doesn't just come to us in ideas or metaphors. In true Lutheran fashion, He comes to us **physically**.

Just as Thomas needed to touch the skin and the scars, we are invited today to a table where the "easy answers" end and the "Real Presence" begins. In a few moments, you will hold the bread and taste the wine. This is our "Thomas moment." Jesus doesn't ask you to have a strong faith muscle to come to this table. He only asks you to have an empty hand.

In the Eucharist, Jesus says to you exactly what He said to Thomas: *"Here I am. Touch me. Eat. Drink. My body, given for your scars. My blood, shed for your doubts."* So, if you are struggling today—if your faith feels more like a whisper than a shout—take heart. Your doubt is not a barrier to God; it is the very place where He meets you. You don't have to cultivate a perfect faith for God to take care of the rest. God has already done the "rest" on the Cross.

Faith is not your grip on God; it is God's grip on you when your hands are shaking too hard to hold on.

To the "Thomas" in all of us, Jesus says: *"Peace be with you."* Not because our questions are all answered, but because the One with the scars is in the room.

Amen.

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