

## Transcription of Bishop Hazelwood's April 19 Sermon

*(Because this is a transcription of an audio recording it is not corrected for errors)*

A coin starts a football game. Some other sporting events. Typically, it's heads or tails. Today, I want to suggest that the two sides of this coin are faith and doubt. Now, I've not been able to slice a coin and separate that. Either literally or in my life.

Some of you are old enough to remember a bumper sticker. Question authority. Actually, for me it was a bumper sticker that I started to see after it had been popular. Cause I'm a little younger than that generation that experienced that. But that idea of questioning authority, although it had a different connotation, I think is relevant for us today. I was blessed very early on in my life as a young high school student with a guidance counselor who doubled as my constitutional law teacher. Now, on one particular occasion, I got in trouble with some of my friends. I won't go into the details, but I'll just say that we were involved in some things that were not. Right. When I got caught and I was summoned to my guidance counselors office and I sat there and talked with him and he knew me pretty well. Even though it was a really large high school, 3000 students in Los Angeles Unified School District, Birmingham High School. As we sat there and we talked about this particular event, I remember describing how I just kind of went along with everybody else. And he said something to me at that time and he said, "you know, Jim. It's OK to ask yourself, Why am I doing this? It's OK to question." Now, he was talking about a particular event. But I remember that lesson as having broad application going forward. Later in college, in philosophy classes, in seminary, in religion and theology classes.

I met people that said to me, it's OK. It's good to question. That's important for us today. The gospel lesson of Thomas is actually one of my two favorite stories in the Bible. I've gotten more than just two, but these would be the top two. The first being Jacob wrestling with the angel and the second being this gospel story of Thomas. Jesus has died. He's been crucified on the cross. Abandoned, forsaken, forgot. And three days later, he's resurrected. Now, last week, we heard the story of people running to the tomb. In today's lesson, it starts off and it says later that day. So actually, today's lesson is really starting last week. The disciples are gathered in a room. The doors are closed and Jesus comes into the room. He appears to them. Now, the disciples then go on and they find Thomas, who was not present for this. And they say we've seen the master. He's alive. And Thomas, expressing a healthy skepticism, says, unless I see the evidence, unless I put my finger in his hands, my hand in his side, and in other words, unless I have a tactile, concrete experience, I'm not going for. Now, a week later. OK, now or to today. Jesus appears to the disciples this time Thomas is with them. He actually walks through the door. Goes right over to Thomas. They have this exchange where Jesus invites him, touch me. And out of that, Thomas says, my lord. Jesus then says that saying that goes down through the ages, essentially a version of you have believed because you've seen, you've touched. Blessed are those who believe and have not seen. I'm very grateful for this particular story in the Gospels, I'm glad that the writers of the Gospels included it because I think it affirms something that we all experience.

Doubt. Wonder. Curiosity. But before we go on, let's talk a little bit and get clear on what I mean by doubt. You see, there's some other perspectives that are prevalent in our culture today. One would be the cynic. Now, a cynic is different than a doubter. A cynic is someone who once imagined ideals like truth and justice. But after some disappointments in life, they've come to say they're not for me. Then another person could be what's called a nihilist, midlist, nihilistic tendencies. This is someone who, having failed to find anything redeeming in themselves or in the world, just wishes to eradicate hope and truth and promise from everyone's life. And then the third is a doubter, a doubter is someone who deep down longs for hungers, for desires, truth, meaning, hope and love. They just wonder. They just wonder when they're going to see it. Wonder and doubt.

I want to read for you a sonnet. I recently came across the Anglican priest Malcolm Guite, who has a collection of really wonderful sonnets. Now, I have not really been a fan of sonnets. In fact, I don't think I really meant read many sonnets since I had a class in Shakespeare a very long time ago. Malcolm Guite has brought those back to life for me. Listen to this one, which is called St. Thomas the Apostle.

We do not know. How can we know the way?  
Courageous master of the awkward question.  
You spoke the words the others dared not say  
and cut through their evasion and abstraction.  
O Doubting Thomas father of my faith.  
You put your finger on the nub of things.  
We cannot love some disembodied wraith,  
but flesh and blood must be our king of kings.  
Your teaching is to touch, embrace, anoint.

Feel after him and find him in the flesh  
because he loved your awkward counterpoint.  
The word was heard and granted you your wish.  
Oh, place my hands with yours. Help me divine  
the wounded God whose wounds are healing mine.

I don't know about you, but I think that's wonderful.  
Maybe it's not doubting Thomas. Maybe it's wondering, Thomas, what are what are some things you're wondering about these days? Health comes to mind first. Yours and others that you know. The economy in general and specifically your job or your spouse's job or a friend or family member's employment. And how are you going to get through these times? And then there's democracy. It's fragile, state fragile. It has always been and hanging in the balance. Health, the economy, democracy, those are things I wonder about right now.

We are now living in a time of ambiguity. Certainty has left us, and Thomas is probably our disciple of these days, these times. Thomas embraces. A time of ambiguity. He wonders, he doubts. And as the poet Malcolm Gate writes, you know, he leads us forward. Ambiguity is hard, but for Lutherans, it's actually something we do well. And for New England, Lutherans, we do it especially well because we have this Yankee libertarian independence. We are on our own. There are in Maine and New Hampshire and Vermont. Long driveways that you drive down to get to someone's home. Symbolic of a certain sense of I'm on my own down here. I'm OK. But one of the things that is also true that we need to balance out our Yankee independence with is our now global interdependence. For if nothing else covered 19 has revealed to us many, many things. But one of the truths is that we are indeed interconnected.

We are interdependent. We are a global society. We cannot run from that. It is who we are. It is the world. We have made. And so in this interconnectedness, I think there's also something for us to remember in these days. Do we need one another? We are at our best when we are with one another. Whether those be neighbors. Or relatives near or far. We cannot go alone on this path. We have to go this path with each other.

I have to say, one of the things that has really impressed me in the last month is the ways I am seeing our congregations, our campus ministries, our hospital challenge chaplains, our camps, all of the ministries of the New England Synod. I have been impressed with the way we are functioning. I am not hearing lots of histrionics. I'm not hearing lots of complaining. In fact, I'm hearing less of it than before all this. We are really rising to the occasion. That gives me tremendous hope. What I'm seeing, the way you are reaching out to your neighbors, the way you are continuing your ministries of feeding and hungry, the way you are keeping the concerns of our global partners in Honduras and the Holy Land foremost in your minds the way you are praying for others. We're doing this about the best we can.

And so I want to close with a story. It actually comes from another tradition, I believe it's Native American in its origin, and it's a story that I've learned over time. And it's often at times like this is this helped me and maybe it will be helpful for you. The story is of a woman, an old woman who is in a cave. That's a symbolic story. Don't take it literally. And she is weaving a great, beautiful, beautiful blanket with all kinds of intricacies. And parts of it are very unique in parts of it are just glorious with color and parts of us are dark and then other parts are light. It reflects all of the shades. It's really a cosmic story that's being told. It's about all of creation in all of its beauty and majesty. At one point, the old woman gets up, having woven this beautiful blanket, this tapestry of all God's creation, and she gets up and she walks away and goes to attend to a pot on the stove where she's doing some cooking while she's away. A kind of a dog or a coyote or a rooster or a mischievous creature comes along and sees that there's a little frail little thread at the end of this blanket and pulls on it and pulls on it and pulls on it and pulls on it and pulls on it and it all unravels. And when she returned to her once gorgeous blanket. It's now. Just a mess, it's yarn everywhere. And so she sits down. And she sees the thread and she reaches down and she picks it up and she starts knitting and knitting and starts to weave and to weave and to weave. And what appears in time is an even more beautiful blanket.

Now, that's a story filled with lots of rich symbolism. It's an old, old story that's told in cultures as a reminder that when things get pulled apart, somehow they can also get pulled back together. But in that particular story, what gets woven the next time is even more beautiful.

Let's Connect that story to what we have experienced in the last six to seven weeks. I don't just mean the Coronavirus and the pandemic, but I mean the story of our journey from Lent through Holy Week.

The movement and the power of the hope of Christ. Who is the embodiment of love and truth and promise. Hope that prevails, Hope that went through deceit and betrayal and corruption and lying and cheat and arrest and crucifixion and death and burial. And yet that's not the final word. The final word is that Hope yearns to be alive in the world.

Thomas, is our guide through all that, his desire to touch, to put his hands in the wound is something that I think we follow as we go through it. We touch the wounds and the wounded God, is the God that heals us and will heal all of God's creation.

This will pass. My friends.

And on the other side, hope will prevail. Amen