

Beyond Closure

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on April 11, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:19-31, NRSV)

How satisfying it is when a great story is brought to a fulfilling conclusion! How wonderful is that sense of closure we feel when we come to the end of a story that has engaged us completely: Loose ends are tied together, gaps are bridged, tensions are resolved, blanks are filled, vexing questions are finally answered.

Nerd that I am, I know I felt this way when the final installment in the Harry Potter series was released several years ago. We *finally* learned what Harry's special destiny is, and the secret of his mysterious connection with the Dark Lord Voldemort. We were *finally* shown where Professor Snape's true loyalties lie – and *why* we had such a hard time figuring that out in the first place. We felt the rapture of love as Ron and Hermione finally end up together, and we understood at long last what it would really take to destroy the Dark Lord, and at what cost.

I'm sure I've told some of you of a time several years ago when I bought Lisa the first book in the Hunger Games trilogy. I had just seen the first movie with a friend, and I was very enthusiastic about it, and so, just to surprise her, I swung by the bookstore. She has long been

one of those people who say “the book is always better than the movie”, and I knew that she had just finished a long read, and so I thought she might be up for it.

Fast forward two days later. She gets in from work, and I am already home. She walks in *raving* about the book, and before settling down, she *demands* that I go back to the bookstore the next day and pick up the remaining two books in the trilogy. “I *can’t wait* to read the rest of the story! I *have to know* what happens! *Tom, I’m willing to not cook dinner for you tomorrow tonight to finish them!*”

She can be *very* persuasive! And of course, I did as she asked. Indeed, there *were* so many loose ends ... so many gaps ... so many tensions ... so many blanks ... so many unanswered questions. The gripping conclusion to the trilogy called.

This drive to know and to lay questions to rest is not just an impulse in our engagement with stories. Towards the end of the 19th century, after a series of brilliant discoveries, there were many leading lights in the scientific community who sincerely believed that the gripping conclusion of *scientific* inquiry was on the horizon – that a virtually complete knowledge of the natural world was both possible and within reach ... in which the loose ends from the last few centuries of observation and experiment would get tied together ... the gaps in our knowledge filled ... our remaining questions answered. As one notable scientist supposedly said, soon there would be nothing left to do but refine our measurements.

Some uncertainties remained, some dark clouds of the unknown could be seen overhead, but it was widely believed that those would dissipate in the near future. Now, as it happens, those dark clouds led to the Theory of Relativity and Quantum mechanics ... both of which would revolutionize physics, extend our knowledge immensely – *yet while also raising a million new questions.*

We thought we were near the end and would have it all figured out, only to discover that we had hit a bottomless well of new questions - questions we could never have conceived of before. For all our acquired knowledge, we found that the universe was vastly bigger and more mysterious than ever, and that our quest to tie up those loose ends and fill those gaps and answer all those vexing questions was *hardly over ... it was just beginning.* The great British geneticist J.B.S. Haldane put it best when he said, “My own suspicion is that the world is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.”

This multiplying of questions can be as frightening as it is exhilarating. Our lives in this world present us with all kinds of loose ends ... tensions ... dead ends ... vexing questions. And like our following an engaging story, we long for some of the loose ends in our lives to get tied together ... some of those gaps and blanks in our knowledge filled ... some of those tensions and contradictions resolved ... some of those apparent dead ends redeemed ... and at least *some* of our vexing questions answered. And yet, we have to continue facing our present and future, making choices with incomplete information. Surely Kierkegaard was right when he said that “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

It is for this reason – and not just because I share his name – that I find the figure of Thomas, “doubting Thomas,” so deeply sympathetic. At the outset of our text this morning, we find the disciples hiding in fear. They have received the strange word of their Master’s resurrection and have apparently found that word too good to be true. They don’t believe it, and so they’re in hiding. They are paralyzed. They’re not moving, and perhaps would never have moved, but for the sudden appearance of the risen Jesus in their midst.

And so, Jesus suddenly appears inside. The one who had loved them and given himself for them, suddenly appears before them. His purpose is not to scare them further, still less to dazzle them with magic. His purpose is to empower them, to give them the courage to step outside again. To live again.

“Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus said. It was as if he had said, “Receive into yourselves the wild wind of life,” for in this moment, this huddled-together mass of frightened, self-protective, faltering disciples would become a band of brothers and sisters whose lives would never be the same.

But, of course, Thomas wasn’t there. Now, we don’t know why he wasn’t there. Perhaps he was out checking on his family ... or at a Skeptics Anonymous meeting ... or out doing some detective work, snooping around Jesus’ empty tomb in a quest to figure out what the heck was going on. We don’t know. The text doesn’t tell us. But what we do know is that, upon his return, when told of Jesus’ appearance, he famously declares his doubt ... his need for proof ... something he could, so to speak, get his hands on: “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.”

He wants to know what happened and why. He wants to understand. He wants *closure*. He so longs for it. And why not? In the midst of the inner hell he was going through, had he not earned the right to ask for something?

Just days before, the city was abuzz with Messianic fervor. It was Occupy Jerusalem Day! Jesus rode in on a donkey in an act awash in unmistakable symbolic, prophetic meaning. Joyful shouts of devoted followers filled the air: “Hosanna!” and “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Then, as quickly as it began, it fell apart. There would be no messianic crown – only a crown of thorns. There would be no shouts of victory – only cries of terror and wails of mourning. There would be no rescue or vindication – only another broken, forsaken victim soon to become a statistic.

Thomas’ questions now are unrelenting: What now? Was Jesus a pretender? Or if he wasn’t, how did it all go so terribly wrong? And now they’re telling me that he’s alive after I saw him die? Are they crazy? Am I crazy? And if he really did appear, then why did he not appear to *me*?

Is it really too much to ask for some closure? Why is it so wrong simply to want to understand? And maybe something a little concrete wouldn't hurt.

What Thomas is asking for is the most natural thing in the world. We are no strangers to this. It's deeply human to want what Thomas wants, with all the loose ends, dead ends, tensions, contradictions, gaps, blank spaces, and unanswered questions of our own lives.

Where we and Thomas differ is not really in our doubt, our desire to tie up loose ends, but rather in the unique act of mercy he receives – that Jesus *does* reappear and *does* give Thomas what he asks for, offering him the nail prints in his hands ... the wound in his side ... putting him on a fair and equal footing with the others. It might be seen as the unlocking of the final chapter of a great story which here at the end reveals everything, giving Thomas and the others the ultimate closure for all their experiences and struggles. But as spectacular as this revelation of the living Christ surely is, is this really what they're getting?

Remember last week when I told of the Hobbit Frodo Baggins handing his great work, still incomplete, to Sam and telling him, "These last pages are for you ... for my dear Sam, you cannot always be torn in two. You have to be one and whole for many years. You have so much to enjoy and to be and to do. Your part in this story goes on."

It's not over for Thomas and the others. Thomas is granted what seems like the ultimate closure, and yet his part in this story goes on – in fact, *it has only just started*. Thomas is granted by the risen Christ the chance to settle his heart over what had happened, no doubt a *quantum* leap forward, but a leap forward not to a fulfilling conclusion, but to a new *beginning* in which new, blank pages appear, waiting to be filled with the verses of a lifetime's journey ahead.

It's a journey to be taken in hope, for it is now newly wide open to new adventures and new struggles, and with these, *new* loose ends, *new* gaps and blanks, *new* tensions and contradictions, *new* dead ends, and *new* vexing questions.

This is what the life of faith looks like, a life out *beyond* closure. We really do have to wait for that true final chapter, in which everything will finally come together and all the unknowns are known and all the questions resolved. But I, for one, am OK with that.

And so, in the meantime, we can learn from the wise words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In a letter to a spiritually searching and conflicted young man, a man struggling with many unending questions in his own life, Rilke writes –

I would like to beg you ... as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

As we today go out into this world and live beyond the safety of closure, may we live into the embrace of a God beyond all doubt.

To the glory of God. Amen.