



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, April 7, 2013**

*The Second Sunday of Easter (Low Sunday)*

*Festal Eucharist  
at 11am*

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock

on

John 20:19-31

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*PROBING THE WOUNDS*

Today is the Second Sunday of Easter, and as it happens, I was the preacher for the Second Sunday of Easter last year too. In last year's sermon, I mentioned how surprised I was to have rediscovered my faith in Christ when I was in college. I mentioned before that I was nominally churched when growing up. By the time I entered my teens, I had just enough of an understanding of Christianity to be dangerous to my own well-being. I didn't know enough about our faith for it to be helpful to me, and what little I did know confused and discouraged me. I was a freshman in high school when I quit Christianity.

I was confused because I did not understand what good it could do anyone for Jesus to die on the cross especially if he didn't have a choice in the matter. I had heard that it was God's will that Jesus die and that sounded sick and cruel. And I didn't understand what good it did for Jesus to die on the cross if he was just going to get to come back to life after it was all over. That didn't seem like real death to me. It was death without consequences.

And I was discouraged because Jesus was perfect. His perfect goodness stood as a rebuke to my less goodness. Why weren't my grades better than they should have been; why did I lie to my parents; why did I curse; why was I so angry; why were my body and its impulses beyond my control; why did I feel so out of place in my own life? To my way of understanding, Jesus didn't have anything to say to all of those experiences and many more that I cannot now remember except, "be good like I am good." And I knew I just wasn't that good. And that was so unfair; Jesus was the son of God and I was not. How could I be expected to live up to his standards when I didn't share in his advantages?

So, I just plain quit and struck out on my own. I wound up spending what I thought were a number of happy years with nary a thought about God or Christ. Then I went to college and found myself a believing Christian again. I was not intending to be a believing Christian when it happened; the Lord ambushed me from out behind my own sense of sophistication and snobbery. My friends and I made plans to go see a film about Jesus. This was a controversial film that had come out and Christians were picketing the movie theaters, angry because the film was purported to depict Jesus in a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene. I wanted to see this film as an exercise in looking down my nose at religious fundamentalists; and to buck up my own sense of superiority over the hicks and rubes, the bible thumpers I was sure would be on the picket line.

There were picketers at the theater where I saw the picture and I was so full of myself as I passed them by. I was so sure of myself.

The titillating and, what was supposed to be, shocking bit of that film, the bit about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, was a real disappointment. I think even then I saw that for what it was: the devil's return at an opportune time to spin a vision before Jesus as he hung on the cross. Come down from that rude tree and I will give you all of this.... a normal human existence. It was no more than another taunt from the rabble: if you are the son of God, save yourself.<sup>1</sup>

The really shocking part of the film, to me, was the wounds of Christ. Jesus, as depicted, was really, really suffering and really, really dying. There were tears and blood and pain and doubt. And yes, there were the wounds. And in the face of all that real pain, and real dying, there were real people just like me, who were looking down their nose at that; laughing at it, spitting on it. And just like me, they seemed so sure of themselves.

For the first time I had been confronted with a Jesus who really was so very good. But his goodness did not seem like a rebuke, but instead was the reaching, embracing tenderness of love. For the first time I was given a glimpse into the struggle that Jesus endured to be the good son that he was. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."<sup>2</sup> I was shocked to discover that there was another way that Jesus could have taken. Suddenly, the salvation of the world, so blithely bandied about in Christian circles, seemed like a nearly run thing. What if Jesus had declined to die?

Years later, I was surprised to hear one of my mentors reference that film in a lecture. He dismissed the titillating bit of the movie as the filmmakers completely missing the mark on that point. "Give the devil his due," he said; "Satan had tried temptations as humble as food for a starving man to possessing all the kingdoms of the world and Christ had resisted every one. A liaison with one of his disciples was not going to get Jesus off the cross." The real temptation must have been closer to this: the devil slips up to Jesus hanging on the cross and whispers in his ear. "Look at them. You know they're not worth it." Jesus' death is his answer to that accusation. Saint Paul gives it voice when he asks, "Who is it that condemns? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who is making intercession for us."<sup>3</sup> Jesus' death is the declaration that he knows we're not quite worth it. Sin has got to be dealt with. But his resurrection and ascension to intercession on our behalf are his declaration that we are worth every bit of it, and he'll see the devil cast into hell forever before he'll hear another accusation against us.

The gospel of John records two things that Jesus said about handling his body after the resurrection. Jesus meets Mary Magdalene near his tomb. At first she doesn't recognize Jesus. His voice moves her towards a kind of recognition and she says, Rabboni, calling him by what was probably an old and familiar form of address between them. She makes a motion to embrace Jesus. He stops her: "Touch me not."<sup>4</sup> But days later, when Thomas finally meets the risen Lord, Jesus invites him to probe the wounds in his hand and side.<sup>5</sup> What does any of this mean? "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I understood like a child, and I thought like a child: but when I became a man, I began putting away childish things. There was a time when it was difficult to see things clearly it was as if I were looking at things, at Jesus specifically, through a dim pane of glass. But then I caught a glimpse of who I was looking at and it was as if I were face to face with him. And I have been assured that one day I will really get to meet him face to face. And that what I know only in bits and pieces now, I will know more fully. And that I will come to know the Lord as well as he already knows me."<sup>6</sup> And so will you.

I don't know that there is anything exceptional about my having come to faith, or you having come to faith or you doubting that you can come to faith or you wishing you could. Except

that it still surprises me how I could have gone into a movie theater so very much not a Christian and come out two hours later very much one. And you have your own story, a story as precious to Jesus as any other. What's exceptional is that Jesus has been calling people to recognition ever since the invitation once given to Mary and to Thomas? We all sometimes hold onto some old and worn out, unhelpful and discouraging notions about Jesus. Jesus will not be bound by them, can't fit into them, and as much commands us to not cling to him in that way. And in the same breath shows himself to us, for who he really is, and invites us to probe the wounds and believe in something so much more glorious than we dare imagine. Jesus comes down to wherever people are, right past their snobbery, their laughter; their derision and rejection; invites them to probe the wounds and brings them to their knees and to confession.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 27.40

<sup>2</sup> Luke 22.42

<sup>3</sup> Rom 8.34

<sup>4</sup> John 20.17

<sup>5</sup> John 20.27

<sup>6</sup> 1 Cor 13.11-12