Year after year, we tune our ears and our imaginations to hear again the story of Thomas who, for good or ill, has become for us “the Doubter”. Sermons on doubting Thomas, preached across the span of two millennia in every corner and language of the world would fill volumes. Why? Because it makes such a good story. Here is one of the twelve who misses a visitation by the risen Lord, who scoffs at those who have seen him, and then who eats crow as he bows before the risen Christ to confess, “My Lord and my God!” Storytelling doesn’t get much better than that. So no sermon on doubting Thomas today, at least from this preacher. What if, instead of hearing again the story we’ve heard so many times, we name the steps Thomas takes in the story that bring him to the place of genuine personal faith. In that naming, we all might come to see for ourselves how we come to believe in the One whose resurrection we celebrate and in whose life we live by faith. Let’s see where this takes us.
The story tells us in stark terms that all of us come to believe when we first realize we are in the place of absence. The Bible, across the centuries of its writing, tells many stories of men and women who experience the absence of God. For some, like Adam and Eve, their own sin and disobedience moves them from Eden’s security to the wilderness of exile, emptiness, and absence. Others like Elijah flee the presence of God, holed up in a cave, alone and afraid. Perhaps the best example is Jonah, who tries to escape to the edge of the world only there to discover in the belly of a great fish that nothing can remove him from the One who created him.

Our first steps in coming to believe are laden with dis-ease, unrest, willful pride, all of which keep us from seeing the risen Lord. Thomas missed that first meeting, and maybe for good reason. Perhaps his wife was ill or he got caught in the crush of foot traffic somewhere in Jerusalem’s narrow streets. Why he was absent is not the point. That he was absent tells us that the journey of faith often finds its beginning by admitting the absence of God and confessing our deep longing for
God. St. Augustine long ago gave us a sentence that has haunted the human family with its truth for now better than 1,600 years. “Our hearts,” said Augustine, “are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” When you find yourself experiencing God’s absence, God’s silence, or some spiritual void that has fear written all over it, know that you are where the journey of faith can begin for you.

We see a second step in our coming to faith in an odd place. When Thomas is confronted by the others who urge him to accept the Good News of our Lord’s risen life, he protests saying “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.” Did you hear what I heard? Thomas demands not only our Lord’s presence, but he insists on placing his finger in the nail piercings of the Savior’s hand AND in the gaping flesh wound of his side. Thomas demands not only presence, but “hands on” or “hands in” verification. Coming to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord seems to demand some kind of experiential, sensory, personal action that claims faith for ourselves.
Many of us in God’s Church received the gift of growing up in a home where faith and prayer, love of God and the Church were part of the very atmosphere created by faithful parents. Such gifts shaped who we are and so much of who we understand God and our Lord to be. But personal, living faith in Jesus Christ only becomes life-shaping and meaningful when we touch with hands of faith and hold with hands of love the One who gave his life for us. Thomas’ audacious request was not some gory, prurient curiosity on his part. Rather, his demand for personal encounter with Jesus Christ shows us we must insist on no less. We come to believe when each of us, in our own way, and in our own time, and with our own experience touch and are touched by the One who died and rose again. Such demanding of God is not outrageously bold, but rather required in our coming to believe that Jesus is Lord.

Acceptance is the third moment in our coming to believe. A week passes and now Thomas is with his friends – they are all together – when the risen Lord again appears in their midst. You can almost hear the shuffling of sandaled feet as the disciples clear away an open space in
the middle of the room giving Thomas full entrée to our Lord’s risen presence. “Thomas! Put your hand here in my hands. Reach out your hand, touch my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas falls to his knees confessing, “My Lord and my God!” In a flash of insight and transformation, Thomas accepts for himself what others had told him was true. He moves from stark absence through the place of demanding evidence into the realm of faithful acceptance. Seeing, for Thomas, is believing.

No weight of evidence, no nail-scarred proof of death or glorious risen light can compel you or me to believe. We come to believe, we move into the realm of faith, as an act of personal, daring acceptance. We accept our Lord’s death and resurrection for us, we experience his presence within and about us, and we celebrate his love among us as gifts received in faith – nothing more, nothing less. Thomas walks around in all of us because our coming to believe in Jesus Christ, our faith in Jesus Christ is a journey of awareness that takes us from absence to presence. This journey of coming to believe was the experience of all
the first followers of Jesus Christ. The reading from the tiny book of First John said it clearly: “Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes – or better translated, who is believing – that Jesus is the Son of God?” Believing is a process, a movement that is always ongoing in our lives. Times are, we are not two blocks past the Church’s parking lot after worship that some flicker of God’s absence stalks our souls. And when that happens, we find ourselves again to the place where we believe all over again.

So where are you today, dear one? Have you thought for some time – maybe a lifetime – that faith is a destination, a place, a certainty that some people “get” and the rest of us just miss? If that’s what you’ve written down on a slip of paper years ago, tear up that paper and hear the Good News. We who are ever coming to believe, coming to faith, coming to an awareness, an acceptance of all God wants us to know. Make friends with Thomas today. He is our brother on the journey. And with him and all the faithful of the ages, we move from
absence to acceptance, from questions to awareness all in the presence of the One who died and rose again, even our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.