

Be Freed from the Shackles of the Mind!
Sermon for the 1st Sunday after Easter (Quasimodogeniti)

Sermon Text: John 20:19-29



On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." ²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe." ²⁶ Eight days later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Some things in life just don't fit into our heads. This is usually because we have become so accustomed to the course of everyday life that we can't imagine anything else. And when something completely new and unfamiliar happens, we can't accept it. Then we react with insecurity, anxiety, and we freeze in our tracks. Sometimes we can't even accept the new and unfamiliar, even if it's something good. That's also what happens to elephants in India. Apparently, when young elephants are tamed there, they are tied to trees with thick ropes. This is how the young animals learn at an early age that a rope always means that they can't break free and run away. Later, adult elephants that weigh several tons are tied up with a thin strip of clothesline. These elephants can't free themselves even then because they firmly believe that the clothesline is an insurmountable obstacle. If you thought about this externally, you'd start to wonder. But for the elephants, they can't look at it objectively, viewing it from the outside is not possible. They are trapped in their worldview, in their upbringing, and in their everyday lives.

We are in a similar situation to the elephants. We are trapped in a bubble where there is war, hatred, lies, and doubt. When something really good and unusual happens, we can't really believe it. It just doesn't fit in our heads! We don't even dare to tell others about it because in the midst of darkness and sadness, it makes no sense to talk about hope. This is how the first Christians felt after Jesus' resurrection. The fact that Jesus had risen from the dead just didn't fit into their minds. *"Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe,"* said Thomas. It's actually unfair that this Thomas is later called "doubting Thomas." After all, Peter wasn't given the label "denier." And aren't we all like Peter and Thomas, not reacting to the great gifts that God gives people. Instead, we only respond to the facts that are in front of us. The fact is that people are constantly dying around us. Do you know even one person who has simply risen from the dead? What if death is really like a thin clothesline? What if what makes us shy away from death is simply ignorance? Aren't we, like the elephants in India, trapped by death because we are limited by our horizons? And can't the same be said of all the other side effects of death? Death, sin, and the devil only have power because we believe them!

Jesus' resurrection breaks through this barrier of our ignorance. And Jesus wants us to be freed from the prison of death. He wants us to know that Satan no longer has any power over us. And that's why He revealed Himself to the disciples again and again. So Jesus shows us in a very dramatic way that from now on, the Christian life rests on a completely different foundation. He does this first by simply walking through a wall. The truly amazing thing is this: Jesus, who walks through walls, is not a ghost. He's a man of flesh and blood

whose side and hand marks Thomas can touch. That really knocks Thomas and everyone else off their feet. John explains what's happening in such a way that we can imagine it exactly. First, dull fear, then shimmering hope, then stuttering confession: *"My Lord and my God!"* All of this completely changes Thomas and the other disciples. Fear gives way and peace returns. Instead of sitting and cowering in a room, they are given a mission – and the best thing of all is that they can know that the living Jesus is there! In our midst! This is exactly where it becomes clear what it means to be a Christian. Neither great philosophical wisdom nor the power to do great miracles are the things that define us as Christians. The only thing that defines us is this: the knowledge that Jesus is really there! This happens especially when we gather together in His Word. Then the living Jesus comes into our midst. He meets our unbelief and changes us too! It's a blessed moment that we are told about by the apostle John. We see the disciple Thomas in the arms of his Lord, his eyes beaming with joy. Yet Jesus' words point beyond this moment in history. *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* By saying these words, He looks beyond this immediate experience and sees His church in the distant future. Jesus also has us in mind with this! Don't we wish we had an experience just like Thomas? A Jesus who walks through walls and makes it clear once and for all what is going on? Jesus doesn't do that. Instead, He knows that faith relies on a Lord whom we don't see. Faith dares to go where no human understanding can go. Faith hopes where, humanly speaking, there is nothing to hope for. And faith must always prove itself under the test of doubt. Thomas and the other disciples also had to go out into the dark, hostile world after this blessed moment with Jesus. They got to preach about the One who had just been executed by the state. Almost all the disciples had to suffer death because of their preaching. They had to experience what Jesus describes here – faith and not seeing. We live in not seeing. We can see this in the following examples: At church, we have the hands of a completely normal person placed on our heads. He says to us: "Your sins are forgiven!" But we believe what we do not see with our eyes, namely, that Jesus Himself says these words to us. Even when we feel the pastor's hands on our heads and see the normal person in front of us. We also take ordinary bread and wine at Communion. It's our faith that tells us: "This is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ!" We can't always lie in blissful peace in the arms of our Lord Jesus. Faith that Jesus has conquered death doesn't always shine through our knowledge. Sometimes we are attacked by doubt and temptation. It is not uncommon for us to be persecuted and weighed down by many external influences. We barely see and yet we believe. How does this work? Very often, in the midst of such doubts, we are told that all we have to do is believe. But how is it possible to believe against all experience? We see a lot of hardship in our world, we know the conflicts and the difficulties. We also carry the many unresolved problems around in our heads as well as the guilt of things that went wrong before. We also see the many problems in our world. All around us is war, hatred, and lies. We are in exactly the same situation as the disciples after the crucifixion. Their Lord was dead. There was no reason to doubt His death. He was ultimately dead and buried. If it wasn't the Lord Himself who set out, made His way out of the grave, and made His way to each one of them, faith would have been impossible. The story of Thomas is a wonderful story of faith. It shows us that our Lord finds a way for all people to come to faith. Not all paths are the same. As different as people are, our Lord Jesus also finds different ways to us. And this Lord Jesus doesn't give us a magic formula for faith. No shouts of "you just have to believe!" No, He simply comes to us personally. He holds us in His strong arms and lifts us up. What happens then is a revolution that doesn't fit in our understanding at all. It's like the third article of faith says: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him." We can't understand with our own reason. We can't see with our eyes. But through the Holy Spirit, who calls us and writes *Christ* into our hearts, we can do this. Blessed joy, blessed faith, blessed arrival in and with Jesus. Thomas could then only confess "my Lord and my God!" What is contained in this confession is a revolution! Nothing in his life was as it had been before. Thomas and the other disciples were completely transformed. Instead of hiding from the evil things in himself and in the world, he fought back. He rose from his hiding place and proclaimed only Jesus against death, against lies, and against hatred. What these disciples did is comparable to an elephant that has been tied to a clothesline for years and suddenly discovers that this clothesline has no power! Amen.