

## Over One More Set of Hills CONFIRMATION SUNDAY

A Sermon by David Barnes  
April 28, 2019



GOOD MORNING:

LIKE MANY OF YOU, I ENJOY WALKING. Like fewer of you, I enjoy walking uphill. Give me a good cup of coffee and decent clothes and I wander. And when I see a hill, I walk up that hill and continue to do so until there are no more hills left to conquer. I believe that is a part of my nature – a peripatetic one my whole life-where I am always wondering what I might see if I walk up one more hill. Hence the title of this morning’s message taken one last time from poet Mary Oliver.

This poem, “Roses, Late Summer” has always been a favorite because of the picture that it paints for me. An invitation for a walk, hike, journey if for no other reason than to see what lays beyond? Here is the heart of it for me:

*“And over one more set of hills,  
along the sea,  
the last roses have opened their factories of sweetness  
and are giving it back to the world.  
if I had another life  
I would want to spend it all on some  
unstinting happiness.”*

Imagine yourself hiking through a significant mountain range or a series of ascending hills. Do you, like me, wonder if this hill is the tallest one? Are you able to visualize what you will see from the mountaintop or are you open and available to the miracle that might be waiting for you?

I walk a lot in Alta Plaza Park and if you walk up the main set of stairs on Clay Street there is series of steps. And as many times as I've walked up and down those stairs, there is always one more set that I just forget is there. Every single time.

Today is confirmation Sunday and I think of the analogies of mountains and hills; steps and stairs are something that they we are able to relate to. To us they are often obstacles forward, extra work to be done. We view mountains as a part of the work of this world but not an end to themselves.

Now look at those same hills and mountains and remember when you were a little younger. Maybe a lot longer in some cases. Going up might have been work but there was always a competition, challenge that made getting to the top more important than anything else we might imagine. They are the precipice of something unknown but perhaps momentous, not seen but believed. We see the same hills and valleys, why do we view them so differently?

Back to Thomas and his doubts...

In reading about this passage, I came across an interesting idea. We are so wedded to that image of Thomas as a doubter and perhaps even judge him because of the way that word conditions us. So, what if that wasn't what he was experiencing? Richard Carlson, Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania has this to offer:

*"Actually, the Greek word meaning doubt (distazō) never appears in this story (despite the mistranslations of NRSV and NIV in John 20:27). Distazō is found in Matthew's post-resurrection reunion story (Matthew 28:17), but it is completely absent in John 20. Likewise, if doubt is an attitude of uncertainty or a wavering of belief, then Thomas is anything but doubting. Consequently, perhaps the tried and true sermons on doubting Thomas are not true to the text, and other approaches should be tried."*

He adds this thought, "Rather than "doubting Thomas," the text presents "conditional Thomas."

I'm imagining Thomas and how many hills, he and the other disciples climbed. Theirs was a life like no other, following this Jesus. These 12 experienced a world like no others yet they persisted. Moments of astonishment, joy, terror and beauty and love and everything in between. How exhausting must a journey of these be like? I imagine traveling with them and bedding down for the night and wondering is this really my path Lord? Is this where I am really needed?

And what was it about these 12 whom Jesus was so convinced were the right people to follow him? Was there a test? Qualifying exams? SATS? There was only this from Matthew's Gospel:

*While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.*

While our process at Calvary Presbyterian Church might be a little bit different for confirmation class, the ask is in sort of the same vein. We are not asking these young men and women to give up their occupation but instead their sleep time on Sunday mornings. And please, don't take their sacrifice lightly. We didn't ask them to leave their homes and their families and their schools but asked them to imagine what they must have been like for the disciples. I have already seen them struggle with the things that we are asking them to consider but have also seen them attempt to respond in a way that was true to them. I imagine one of them as the doubter and would like to think that moment would have been a grace filled one. Thomas is no stranger but one of our own and how do we respond to his concern? Do we have the words to explain what we have witnessed and isn't he allowed a moment of grace – his Jesus returned and he did not see him! – to understand.

How does Jesus respond to Thomas needs? Here are his words:

*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.' 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.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'*

I'd like you to close your eyes for a minute: just imagine yourself once again as a 13 or 14-year-old human being. Were you in church every Sunday and if so, what was it like? Again, this is as a teen, pre-teen; youth. Were

the services compelling? I know for a fact that there are many people who remember it that way. Was your younger self ever bored, mischievous, acting out? How was your Sunday morning?

The last three years, we have asked our confirmation class attendees to be at the church at 9 am on Sunday morning beginning in September and running through March. There are then statements of faith to be read, preparations of all kinds and then yes, Confirmation Sunday. In response to anyone who anticipates the work of Sunday morning and not the reward, it was such a lovely way to begin my Sunday. I would wake up, think about what was to come and go straight into Sunday school teacher mode. That, truth be told is where the real Crazy Dave abides.

The classes were fun, engaging, thought provoking. We heard about what it is like to be a pastor in this world from three completely unique perspectives. We gave some space for parents to be a part of this year's class and come in and offer some thoughts on their children. We ate, played and talked and through that, started to create a potential road map for their faith journey. They already are aware that the world we live in is indeed round but not exactly level.

They were also asked to say why they wanted to be members of Calvary Presbyterian Church and this is why I thought it was an important time to talk about Thomas and doubt this Sunday. To a person I am sure that they have so many questions and that lack of knowing can really be to some the ultimate roadblock but to them and many in the previous two classes felt very much the same. Yes, there were questions: hard and long and not very well thought out questions but there was also the belief that this church, this place, this community might be the very sort of place that might help them find those answers. And even more amazingly, they might discover older people here looking for the exact same thing.

Blessed are those who believe but have not seen says the Gospel. I would add to that, blessed are they who want to believe and are asking for a little bit of help with that. If you see one of our confirmands looking confused, take a moment to ask them why, and the next time you go out for a walk, find a hill. The view is truly breathtaking.

AMEN

