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Sermon Title: Why India?
Scripture: John 20:24-29
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

John 20:24-29

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.'

Why India? Well, it's school vacation week, half the church is away, Alida has her 14-person mission team in India, it's not quite Lent yet. So it's a good Sunday to use an old standby.

I've been traveling overseas since 1975 — Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. And each time I preach a sermon. "Why Africa?" "Why Nicaragua?" "Why Haiti?" "Why Mexico?" I've been to India 25 times, and many of those times, I preached "Why India?" I did it for lots of reasons. First, self defense! In the old days, especially when I was president of Habitat for Humanity, I'd be away three weeks, four weeks, even six weeks, and my church people wanted to know what the heck I was up to and why they should care.

So I tried to explain myself, which leads to the second reason. I was really explaining "mission," I was trying to explain the connection between church

and mission, between Christianity and mission. I was trying to show that mission work was organically Christian. Integral, innate. Part and parcel of Christianity. It's not a hobby. It's not extracurricular.

Believe me, I didn't know this at first, when I was younger. For a long time, I didn't know this. I love my father; he was my pastor growing up. I love the churches I grew up in. But in all those growing-up years, I never met a missionary, I never heard about missions. I went to a Christian boarding school, I went to a college founded by 13 Baptist pastors, and I never heard a word about missions. I went to a great seminary. I loved it. It was the seminary that gave birth to the modern missionary movement in the early 1800s. But I was there in the 1900s and never heard a word about missions. By the time I became a pastor, I was pretty firmly anti-mission. Whether most pastors admit it or not, they are anti-mission. We sort of think that any time given to mission takes time away from church, and money given to mission takes money away from the church.

That's what I thought. I was wrong. I came to mission late, but quickly. What happened is I went to Africa, and I was blown away! I met missionaries and mission work and the people — the beneficiaries and co-workers. I saw what mission was all about, who did it, and what and why and the spirit behind it. And all those people opened my eyes to all those verses in the Bible I had ignored or neglected or never heard; all those verses that made it clear we are a missionary religion. Our Christian religion begins with John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave — he sent — his son to us." Jesus was sent. Jesus went from point A to point B. Jesus left somewhere else to come here. Jesus was a missionary with a mission.

The fact is God has always been a going and a sending God. God said to Abraham, "Get thee to a far country." God said to Jonah, "Go to Iraq." God sent Phillip into the desert to convert the Ethiopians. God sent Paul out of Israel out into Asia and Europe. And Jesus's final words were crystal clear: "Go ye into all the world." Which brings us to India and St. Thomas (the disciple, not the island).

St. Thomas, forever remembered as "doubting Thomas," all because of one bad day. You just heard our Scripture lesson. It takes place just a few days after the first Easter. Jesus was killed on Good Friday. Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. And everybody who saw Jesus believed that. *Everybody who saw Jesus believed that.* Unfortunately, every time Jesus showed up, Thomas was somewhere else. So Thomas didn't buy it. Executed, murdered, crucified dead people don't just get back up. So Thomas said what any reasonable person would say: "Unless I see for myself, unless I see personal, incontrovertible, un-hysterical, un-groupthink,

un-peer-pressure evidence, I don't believe it." So ... Jesus showed up. Face to face. Personal. One on one. Incontrovertible.

It's easy enough to doubt others. It's easy to doubt God. But it's hard to doubt yourself. So Jesus put himself square into Thomas's life. And dared him to doubt himself. He couldn't. Then Thomas went to India. That's the part the whole world forgets. Poor Thomas has one bad day, and he is forever "doubting Thomas." We forget that he was one of Jesus's most courageous disciples. We forget that he was the one disciple who knew the risk of going to Jerusalem, the risk of death. And Thomas dared to risk it. And we forget that Thomas overcame reason and logic and doubt, put all that aside, and headed off to India to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to a country that even then was exotic and far off ... and dangerous.

India is shaped like an ice cream cone, and Thomas landed at the bottom of the cone. Over time, he made his way up the coast, establishing churches along the way, ending up in the ocean city that we used to call "Madras," now renamed "Chennai." I've been there, a city teeming with people ... and thriving with Christian life, a city with vibrant churches, great missions, a powerful witness today to God's love in Jesus Christ. Thanks to St. Thomas. He got to be a saint by being a martyr. He was killed in that city for daring to bring a new story, a new testament, a new revelation of God's love.

There is a church there — I've been there and prayed there — the Church of St. Thomas, that holds his bones and the spears used to kill him 2,000 years ago. Doesn't seem fair to call him "doubting Thomas," does it?

Thomas was like Johnny Appleseed, planting seeds wherever he went, hoping, believing that one day something good would grow. There are a thousand lessons from Thomas's life, aren't there?

He was a seeker.

He wasn't afraid of risk.

He wasn't afraid of doubt.

He wasn't afraid of faith.

He wasn't afraid of questions.

He wasn't afraid of answers.

He wasn't afraid to change his mind.

He wasn't afraid of adventure.

He wasn't afraid of the unknown.

He wasn't afraid of adversity.

He wasn't afraid of death.

Something about Jesus made it all worthwhile.

My work in India is less heroic, but still dramatic. You folks have been wonderful buyers of my new book. It's sold 1,000 copies, and over 300 just in our church. In that book, there is a whole chapter devoted to India, so I can refer you to that and shorten this sermon. Suffice it to say I was dragged kicking and screaming to India. I had no desire, no interest in going to India. None. I hated Indian food then, and 30 years later, I hate Indian food even more. And I hate snakes. India loves snakes. They worship snakes. I have a friend who has a snake hole in her house. They leave milk for the snake, a cobra!

On Friday I was at the local coffeehouse working on this sermon. I ordered my first of many cappuccinos. You know how coffee baristas like to make a little design on top of the cappuccino? My barista, who had read my book, made a little cobra on my cappuccino, with great pride, to please me. I nearly fainted.

But with packets of Lipton Cup-a-Soup, Pop-Tarts and peanut butter, I have survived 25 trips to India. I have met the snakes, eaten the curries, survived the heat, eaten the mosquitoes, survived the traffic, and lived long enough to tell you this story.

I went to India once because I had to. I've gone back because God called me. Literally, not figuratively. Literally, God called me. That always spooks people when I say that. It's not popular to talk about hearing voices. I'd point out a couple of things. First, it doesn't happen to me a lot. Second, it's always good to test those voices. Is what you're hearing in tune with the rest of God's Gospel? Is it self-serving? For example, "God told me to tell you to double my salary!" That isn't Biblical, and it is self-serving, so it doesn't pass the smell test. Well, here's what God told me, and you decide if this passes the smell test.

Let me just read for my book, page 103. Here's what happened one night in India, "God bestirred my soul. I mean that, God shook me to the core. Late at night, but clear as day, God told me to "start a ministry, call it Friends of Christ in India, which comes out as FOCI. Foci is the Latin plural of focus, because you are to have two *foci*, evangelism and social action. Evangelism is telling people about Jesus, and social action is doing what Jesus told us to do. FOCI is to do both. And don't take a penny for yourself."

Blunt. Direct. Loud and clear. Specific. Demanding. Not a lot of wiggle room. My life would be a whole lot easier if I could convince myself it was really a dream. Or if God had said, "Why not give this a try?" Or if it was more like a hint, a push, an idea, something a bit more nebulous, flexible; something

less vocal, less verbal, less real, less loud and clear, less demanding. But it wasn't nebulous or a hint.

Instead it's 29 years later. Alida is over there with nine teenagers from our SPF group and five adults. And they're walking in the footsteps of St. Thomas. I could fill you with stories of what they've been doing just in these five days, and I probably should ... that would be better than this sermon.

I could tell you about the first night. They went to a house for children with AIDS — orphans, kids whose parents had died, but not before passing on AIDS to their kids.

I could tell you about the day they spent with all the elderly, poor men and women we care for each and every day. It's run by a nun and her brother, and they yearn to take in more elderly, if we have the money.

I could tell you about our old mission hospital and all our medical work kept alive by the sheer obstinacy of our Dr. George Longstreth and his team of doctors and nurses, many from right around here, who have pushed and fought and threatened and given and given and given, just to give poor people a shot at a little health.

When John and Connie DeMattia from our own little church started funding our work, they told me something very profound and beautifully simple. They said, "Every day, most of us get up, we have some ache or pain, some sniffle, some medical issue, we walk to the medicine cabinet, find the right tablet or call the local pharmacy. Before we know it, we're at work, we're on the golf course, we're productive and feeling fine. Over there in a rural village, a poor family wakes up, their bones ache, their joints, fevers are raging, and if they don't work, they don't eat. But there are no tablets, no medicine chests, no pharmacy, no insurance." The DeMattias said, "We just want to give those folks a chance, a good day." So they fund our medical work in rural villages.

Sure, I could tell you all those stories and 100 more, but I'll close with just one about our leper colony, our village for lepers. Leprosy, today called Hansen's disease, one of the scariest, most stigmatized, dreaded diseases of Biblical proportions. It destroys nerve endings, disfigures its victims. Destroys families and hopes and dreams. Twenty-five years ago I met them. They were living under a bridge. So FOCI raise the money and Habitat for Humanity built them simple houses, just a small step towards some dignity, some sense of community, some security.

We provide food and medicine and clothing; we have a church there, and a community center; our medical team visited there in January, and saw immediately that the houses needed repairs, urgent repairs — plastering, fixing, cementing, some carpentry work.

I've always loved an old cartoon. I've forgotten the name. It features two little birdlike characters. They're standing at the edge of a huge cliff. And they spot another little birdlike character hanging on the edge of the cliff for dear life by its tiny little fingers, surely about to fall to its death. And one of the little birdlike characters turns to the other and says, "Somebody really ought to do something about this." Of course, modern American politics has two easy answers. One group would say, "The government really ought to do something about this." The other group would say, "The little birdlike character ought to pull himself up by his bootstraps." But Christianity says, "Here's our mission." Christianity says, "I don't know how this little fellow got into this predicament. I don't know why he's hanging on the edge of a cliff. I don't know who's to blame. I don't know what the government can do. I don't even know if this little fellow has bootstraps to pull himself up by. I just know he's hanging on for dear life, and I'm here, and I know my Bible, and I know what Jesus would do."

So Dr. Longstreth and his team saw all these lepers hanging on for dear life, trying to survive by their fingertips, their lives in precarious disrepair, and they were there, they knew their Bible, and they knew what Jesus would do.

Dr. Longstreth's medical team arrived back in the U.S. about January 22. By February 1, they had raised all the money to repair all the houses. Alida was at the leprosy village on Thursday, letting them know that God's love through Jesus Christ, working in our doctors and nurses convincing friends and family to give U.S. dollars, was all set to touch their little houses with God's love. And two teenaged boys from our church, Andres Schuchert and Will Passmore, stood before the village of lepers and proclaimed the Gospel, what we call the Good News, that God's love is stronger than any hurt, any evil, any sorrow.

That's this religion of ours, this church we're at this morning, this mission we do is real. And we won't quit. We won't tire. We won't grow cynical. We won't forget.

Why? Why India? Why mission? Because, like dear old St. Thomas, we've decided to put our doubts aside and live with faith. It's more fun. It's more interesting. The food may be terrible. But ... the voice in your head or your heart might be real.