

“THOMAS IS A FRIEND OF MINE...”

Text: “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 believe.’ **John 20:28**

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It was one week and a day after Easter. The wording in John 20:26 indicates that there had been a previous visit of Jesus to see the eleven remaining disciples (Judas Iscariot had committed suicide.) It took place on the first Easter Sunday evening (John 20:19); at that time it says, "Thomas was not with them." It does not say where he was or why he was not there - no hint at all. You might think he would have stayed with them to share their common grief; some would say he should have been there. I can hear the disciples chiding, "Where were you, Thomas? You missed it! The Lord came by to visit us. And you were not here! He asked about you."

Oh dear, when they told him Jesus had been there, he was stunned and said flatly that he did not believe them, adding, "Unless I see the nail-prints in his hands and place my hand in his side (where the spear had pierced the savior) I will not believe!"

Thomas has been maligned over the centuries as the one who doubted the Resurrection. Old "Doubting Thomas" is the epithet often used to stifle honest inquiries and to shush any probing questions. It is the barb we use to nail down the edges of our guilt, as if it were somehow more Christian to rest content and never ask a serious question – let alone ever dare to be search deeper. You are not supposed to have doubts in the Church. Not true.

I like an honest man or woman, and I think Jesus liked them too. More, I think there is a secret touch of Thomas deep within us all. Every time we use the brain God gave us and let it stretch us a little further, every time we peek over the edges of our belief into the dark woods beyond, the patron saint we need to hold our hand and walk us along is Thomas.

Thomas was not his proper name, by the way. It literally means "twin," from the Greek word Teoma. It seemed important in the Gospels to tell us he was a twin, although we know nothing about his twin brother. In some collateral material from the early years of the Church we discover that Thomas' full name was Didymos Judas Thomas - Judas being a common name at the time. You will remember that there were two other disciples with the same name: Judas Iscariot and Judas the Less. (I have always wondered how Judas felt about being called "Judas the Less.")

Where do you think Thomas was when Jesus came on Easter night? I don't know; I guess no one does. Perhaps he had some errands to do, although that is unlikely. Could be he wandered off to grieve a little on his own; some people need to do that. Theirs is a different grief. The greater they are the harder they fall, and Thomas was a great one. He was a cautious man who searched for something to hold on to all his life, and he finally found his peace when he met Jesus. But shaw, just when found what he needed, Christ was gone!

Sudden death has a way of twisting us around. Author Joan Didion asked the right question in her book, A Magical Year, when her husband John Gregory died suddenly one evening in their living room: "How can it be that one moment he was here and we were talking, and the next moment when I stepped out into the kitchen to make us some supper, he was gone from me, forever?" It does not fit our categories of what should and should not happen. It takes a long time to absorb it, as we trilly on down the road without the one we love. It is not right or good or fair. Little wonder St. Paul calls death the last enemy, more so the death of a young friend by crucifixion.

Thomas was one of those people who had to solve his problems by himself. That's OK. Thomas is allowed to be Thomas, and you are allowed to be you. I don't mean that you have to have doubts too; but if you do, you and the Lord Jesus can handle them together. People always want to tell other people what to think and how to grieve, as if everybody had to fit the pattern cut out by the one who is talking. I don't subscribe to the classic chatter that the only way to diffuse your grief is by talking about it, or getting it out in the open. People talk when they are darn good and ready. And when someone tries to get them to talk when they don't want or need to, it can cause some consternation! I don't like people around when I feel sad; it is just me and the sadness - and the Lord. Could be that Thomas was like that.

But, all that said it still was a pity he was not there when Jesus came back from the Grave. Later, when Thomas returned from wherever he was, they all said: "Thomas, he was here. We saw him. He is not dead! He is risen, as he said." Thomas stared and stalked in disbelief, half angry, half feeling guilty that he missed it. "Come on," he murmured defensively, "What do you mean? You didn't see Jesus, you saw a vision. Dead men do not come back to life again. It must have been an apparition." Then he added the familiar words, "Unless I see the nail prints in his hands, or touch the wound in his side, I never will believe it, never, period! You're crazy!" And off he went again, to where it does not say.

Then, eight days later they were together in the same house. Jesus appeared to them again and this time Thomas was with them. How Jesus got there, no one knows. The Bible says that the doors were closed, which implies that he somehow floated through the walls. He said, "Peace be with you." That was nice. Then, he looked at Thomas and said, "OK, Thomas, you want some proof? Come and touch the nail prints in my hands. What happened to your faith? Come on, put your finger in my side, there's the wound." Curiously, it does not say that Thomas took advantage of the offer. He never touched Jesus' resurrected body. He just shuddered a bit and whimpered, "M-m-my Lord and my God! I've been such a fool. It's really you, you are here! Praise God. I believe!"

Cautious he was, but Thomas was not dumb. He insisted on a second look, but he did not make a fetish out of his doubt. A seeker Thomas was, but when the One he longed for and sought after gave him a second chance, he took it. His seeking days were done, again. He would not pretend; he did not listen to the others; he sulked away for a week, but when he saw Jesus with his own eyes, he believed.

Thomas has been a friend of mine, a fellow traveler, a comrade, a brother for most all my life. I would guess that I have spent more quiet time with him than with any of the other Twelve - strange that. I guess it is out of the same need that sends me back to Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament when I get confused and befuddled by the enormous magnanimity of the Christian faith.

Mostly we have a tendency to separate people into two groups: the good guys and the other ones; pious people here, petty ones over there. This is my team; over there is the other team. My wife says that when I watch TV I always pick a side: no matter neither what sport nor which teams are on the playing field, I am passionately connected to one and not the other. Cricket? I

am for England. Rugby, I cheer for Manchester. Soccer, the Celts are suddenly my team. American football? the Panthers; NASCAR, No. 24! I pick one and I stick with them. There are the believers, and there are non-believers; in between on the misty flats the rest drift to and fro.

But the Bible doesn't do it that way. It does not draw those lines so quickly. The Bible knows there is a little bit of Thomas in us all. Jesus knew that some of his followers would need a second look. Karl Jung once cautioned us that: "All things cast a shadow, even our faith." Thomas was the one who expressed his doubts about the resurrection. He had other reservations, too. There could be a little shade of Thomas wandering around this sanctuary today, seven days after Easter. Set it free!

Some people know it all. I always have had a cautious reservation about those who know all the answers and who ooze their religion all over me, all the time. With them, everything is final. They are preoccupied with their own salvation, as if the whole universe was designed so that we could fall safely into the arms of Jesus and relax and feel good about how much the Savior loves me. I am a little suspicious about those who try to shut down every single conversation with, "Well, That is not what Jesus would say or do" – as if they knew. The Bible has a central message, but many times the final Word is not as clear as the one who is saying it seems to think.

Oh dear, we better move on. The first time we come across Thomas, it is in the listing of the twelve disciples. By the way, we tend to think of the Twelve Apostles as an unbroken unit, chosen and bound together forever by Jesus Christ himself. We assume that they were the ones who believed and suffered and we have them alone to thank for the origin and propagation of the Faith. The facts of the matter are not quite like that.

It might surprise some of you that there is no definitive listing in the Bible as to who The Twelve Apostles really were. In his Gospel, John often mentions "The Twelve"; but apparently he did not know all twelve names for he does not even try to form a list. In John a disciple named Nathaniel appears from nowhere, never mentioned by Matthew, Mark or Luke. Most scholars guess that he was most likely the one the others called Bartholomew. By the way, there are four complete lists of the disciples. If you choose to follow up and compare them, turn to Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19, Luke 6:14-16; and a repeated listing by Luke in Acts 1:13.

The evidence is not conclusive, although it is not damaging to the cause either. Matthew and Mark, for example, list the other Simon's name as Simon the Canaanite (or Cananean.) Luke calls him Simon the Zealot. In some early translations Matthew included Labbeaus as a disciple, probably a variation of Thaddeus. He elevates Simon-Peter, James and John. In the Synoptic Gospels Thomas is just a name. In John he is quite prominent, as we will see.

All four Gospel writers speak freely of The Twelve, which could lead you to think they were a close-knit band of ancient brothers. The Gospels do note that there were divisions among them, but we assume all Twelve were all on the First Team, except Judas Iscariot of course, who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Acts One, by the way, tells the story of how the eleven elected another disciple to take his place, a man named Matthias, who once elected sadly

disappears completely from the story. But it seemed important to keep the number at 12, most likely in reference to the twelve tribes of ancient Israel and of course the book of Revelation (Chapter 21) says that the heavenly city had “twelve foundations, and on them the names of the Twelve Apostles were inscribed.”

It is troubling to try to reconcile the various lists. It helps a little if you remember that the Gospel writers are going from memory, about twenty, thirty, even fifty years later. To test myself, as I near the 55th Anniversary of my Graduation from Peabody High School, I tried to list twelve of my significant classmates back then. I tried hard, but I couldn't do it. I did remember the name of the President of the class, but that was cheating because he became a famous movie star (Chuck Grodin.) I recalled my friend Walt Painter, who I haven't seen for decades, and ditto Rev. Don Hamilton. I hesitate to tell you that I can remember a girl or two, or three or four or more; but naturally, when I met my Peggy in college, they all dimmed from view. My sister Carol was in my class so of course I remember her. My oldest friend, Bob Thompson is still my trusty friend so I put him in there at the head of the Twelve. And I remembered the name of Joe Dickert, the only boy who ever beat me up in a fight. I still can't stand the thought of him, and I have no idea where he is, if he is still here at all – maybe not. And sad, it is too late to get even.

But back to the Twelve as a unit: at this point I need to add a couple of footnotes. There is a divided view not only of the names of the Twelve, but also over what they meant to Jesus and what they were supposed to do and be. For example, if you read only Mark, the first Gospel, you would assume that they were for the most part, examples of what not to do. In Mark, the disciples almost always fail to understand. They ask dumb questions and do the wrong things. They are timid and afraid and seldom understand his message and mission.

In Matthew we get a different picture: the disciples there are those who understand the Savior. Jesus gave them authority to teach and preach, and they came to realize who he was. They were even empowered to forgive sins and to heal the sick. It is a different view from Mark. When you get to Luke, the third of the Gospels, the importance of the Twelve has waned again, although not to the level of Mark.

St. Paul mentions the disciples just once in all of his epistles. In I Corinthians 15:5 he tells us that in addition to the others, like the 500 and Peter, the Risen Jesus appeared to “The Twelve.” Paul does mention Peter and the arguments he had with him, the head of the Disciples. He also makes a passing reference to James and John. But it is curious that he does not mention the others all, not once, as if the leadership of the Christian enterprise had already shifted to Paul and his companions, which in terms of world wide exposure, it surely had.

As you know, St. Paul was not one of the Twelve. He never met Jesus that we know of, and most likely never even saw him in person. However he did attempt to authenticate his importance in the scheme of things by insisting that he too, was a bona fide Apostle. In I Corinthians 9:1, he asks boldly, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” - referring not to an actual living presence of Jesus, but to his vision of the Resurrected Christ on the Road to Damascus in Acts 9. Again in I Corinthians 15:8-19 Paul declared that Jesus Christ appeared to him, listed with equal importance to the other appearances of Jesus. He added that through the grace of

God, he worked harder than any of the Twelve in forwarding the Gospel, a brash claim but in the end almost certainly true.

As the life of Jesus and the Twelve unfolds, Thomas was just there, in the background. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke he is just a name. I guess his ego needs were met completely by being Thomas. He did not have to parade around or brag. He was not the kind who has to get into the middle of everything. He did not need to be the center of attention. He just kept on keeping on, faithfully doing his part. You and I both know people like that. While others talk all the time and clamor to be heard, the faithful ones quietly get the job done. Praise God.

I know many, and you do too, who just sense what is important and go about doing it when they see what needs to be done. When they speak, I listen. They give you what you ask for. Thomas was one of those. Almost everything we know about what he did, according to John, took place during the last week of Jesus' life. When things began to matter, there came Thomas to the fore. At first he is just one of the Twelve.

Well, let's turn to John. The first thing Thomas did in the Gospel of John was show his courage when Lazarus was ill and about to die. (Chapter 11) Lazarus, Mary and Martha had a home up in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, at the top of the Mount of Olives. When the sisters sent for Jesus, our Lord delayed a little. Some say it was because to him Bethany was forbidden country. He had caused trouble with the authorities there and he had been warned not to return. He knew that if he went back, even to visit a sick friend, the authorities would arrest him, charge him with heresy and put him to death.

When the news about Lazarus came to Jesus he took two days to think about it. The disciples, to a man, advised: "Don't go, Lord. It is not worth it." I said, "to a man"; excuse me, one disciple refused to join in. Thomas said: "Let's go, Lord; we will all go with you to die together." That took courage! That is loyalty: to lay down your life for your friend! He did not actually have to do it, but he was ready to, and that tells you a lot about Thomas. He apparently caught on quickly, like a couple or three I know who walk into a room and see instantly what is going on. Nietzsche once said that: "God looks with eyes that see everything, and nobody wants to be known that much."

Secondly, Thomas took a significant part in John 14, my favorite chapter in the New Testament. It reads, "Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus Christ is speaking, "You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, you may be also."

In the middle of those marvelous words, along comes Thomas, interrupting, just like someone might stand up today in Sharon Church and interrupt the Preacher. Thomas said, "Hey, hey Lord...I am sorry to interrupt you, but we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" A little impudent maybe, but Thomas could not help it. He had to ask his questions. He never read Dale Carnegie and he never learned to win friends and influence people. "Lord, how can we follow you if we don't know the way?" Jesus was patient. I would have said,

“Hush now, quit interrupting me!” But I am not Jesus. The Master said: “Thomas, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”

The third time we see Thomas is in our lesson in John 19. It is really a non-appearance. Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead and Thomas was not there. Eight days later Jesus came back, and Thomas was there waiting.

Now to help your focus, assume that you are not Thomas, but that you are Jesus. (That will be all too easy for some of you.) What would you have done if you entered the room where this disciple, with whom you shared your life has said, “I won’t believe until I see the holes in his hands?” Well, I don’t know about you, but I would have let him have it, verbally, I mean. But, Jesus did not do that. Other people get angry or pout. Jesus looked into their hearts.

Alexander Maclaren once said that Thomas is misnamed; he was not a doubter, he was disappointed. I think there is a little deeper level here too, psychologically. I think that when he missed being there when Jesus came, he felt left out. John does not tell you what Thomas was muttering to himself under his breath. But it could have been something like “Thomas, you dope, you trapped yourself again; how could you? You fool. If you hadn’t been such a loner and so selfish and had not gone off on your own, you would have been there and seen the Lord. Why do you get so upset when you feel left out of things?”

But then, Jesus had the last word, as Jesus always does and should. Thomas said, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said, “Blessed are you for saying that because you have seen me.” And added his last beatitude, the one we all need to hear: “Blessed are you who have not seen and yet believe,” like you and I and all the rest of us. Thomas saw the Lord; we see him only in faith. As St. Paul adds, “We walk by faith and not by sight.” (II Corinthians 5:7)

But honestly, think about it for a minute, what is so good about seeing? I mean, Matthew said at the end of Chapter 28 that some of the disciples still doubted even though they saw Jesus ascending into heaven before their very eyes. We say, “Seeing is believing.” Well, not always. Robert Browning said that if his friend who passed away ever came back to see him, he would not believe it. “I would think I’d seen a ghost.” What is so great about seeing? Believing matters more than seeing. “Blessed are you who have not seen and yet believe.”

Thomas makes one last appearance in John 21. He was with the group of seven disciples who went back up home to Galilee to reclaim their old lives. For three years they had given their all to follow the Savior, only to have it all crash and burn on a hillside on Calvary. But when they got there they found that the Risen Jesus was waiting for them on the Galilean shore, cooking fish for them to eat after a bad night out on the water. The scene there soon shifts to Simon Peter and what he had to do to please Jesus, but Thomas was there, too.

We do not really know what happened to Thomas after that. In fact we do not really know much about what happened to any of the Twelve. Luke tells us in Acts 12 that Herod the King laid

violent hands on the Christians and in the process killed James, the brother of John. John and Peter have prominent roles in the early chapters of the history of the church.

But then Paul takes over, but we do not really know what happened to him either. The Book of Acts ends with St. Paul in prison over in Rome. It is believed that he and Simon Peter and Andrew were crucified in Rome, relying on western traditions. Various other traditions tend to show how each of the Twelve remained faithful to the end, but almost all of the stories are in legend and lore, not verifiable history.

But, to drop back, it is said that Thomas went up to Jerusalem to gather with the disciples soon after the Resurrection. Jesus had told them to “Go into all the world and share the Gospel.” The Acts of Thomas, an apocryphal gospel not in the Canon of Scripture, reports how the eleven disciples divided up the world among themselves. Thomas drew India. Tradition again says he stood up and said he was not going that far away. Then guess who came to see him again? Jesus, who said: “Thomas, it’s me again. You still have not learned your lesson. Get going!”

So tradition has it that Thomas headed out to the East where he helped to establish churches in Turkey, Iran, and Persia and beyond. There is significant historical credence that he established Churches all over India: in Malabar and in the Punjab, e.g. Edgar Goodspeed tells of how he founded the Syrian Church of South India. Third Century Historian Hippolytus also located Thomas in India. Eusebius confirms that he was an active missionary there and in Iran.

Being wedded to the Western Churches and arising out of the Roman Catholic tradition, we American Christians tend to overlook what was happening in the East, even the great division of Christianity with one location in Rome and the other in Constantinople, dating back a thousand years. We overlook the traditions of the East. The famous Rabban Song recounts how Thomas founded seven major denominational churches there, converted 170,000 Hindus, and performed over 1400 miracles. Those feats are not in the Bible, but they could be true.

Poor Thomas - he was always a little too proud, too scared, too reluctant to surrender, just as the rest of them, and the rest of us. But the nicest thing of all is to know that Jesus loves our kind, too: Thomas and you and me. Thomas was a friend of Jesus; Thomas is a friend of mine; I hope he is a friend of yours, and that not seeing, you still will take a moment here and confess your faith in Christ anew, for now and for evermore. Amen.