

Second Weekend of Easter (B/RCL): "So Much More than 'Doubting' Thomas"
John 20:19-29
April 7-8, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Seeing's believing – but feeling is God's own truth." That Irish proverb seems tailor-made for Thomas, who basically told his friends they were "off their rockers" when they insisted that when he was elsewhere they'd seen the risen Lord. He famously answered 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." (John 20:25)

The second part of his response, about poking a finger in the nail marks and slipping his hand into the gaping wound in the Lord's side, is so -- **strident** – and **gory** -- that I'm thinking it was fueled by the **anger** that often accompanies **grief**.

Maybe Thomas isn't just the patron saint of those who have ever doubted (a club with a huge membership, probably including all or most of us). Maybe he's also the patron saint of those who have loved and lost, those who have invested themselves wholeheartedly in a person who failed them or in a cause that spluttered and died. Thomas was a passionate kind of guy, after all. He doesn't show up often in the Gospels, but when he does, it's memorable.

What do we remember about him?

- In the first 3 Gospels & the Book of Acts Thomas is named as one of the 12 apostles. Period. End of story.
- In the 4th Gospel he's included among the disciples and is referred to as "Thomas, who was called the Twin." One non-biblical tradition says he was referred to as the twin of Jesus, because they looked alike.¹

- When the other disciples told Jesus it was too dangerous to travel to Judea after word arrived from Martha & Mary that Lazarus was so sick, and Jesus said He was going anyway, it was Thomas who courageously added, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16) Thomas was loyal and gutsy.
- At the Last Supper Jesus told His friends He was going ahead to prepare a place for them, "*and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.*" Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life.*" (John 14:3-6) Thomas was boldly, unapologetically, endearingly honest.

I want to know where he was that first Easter evening when all his friends were huddled together behind locked doors. Bible commentators point out we can't know where he was and it doesn't matter, but I'm curious. (Have you seen the cartoon of a dismayed looking cat in a vet's office? He's reacting to the news the vet is solemnly giving him: "I'm sorry. The diagnosis is curiosity." Remember what "killed the cat"??) Where do **you** think he might have been?? (What have **you** done when a loved one's death created a giant, aching void inside you?)

- Getting some fresh air? Stretching his legs? Walking aimlessly and trying **not** to think?
- Keeping his ear to the ground, checking out his sources, to see if anyone else had heard of the empty tomb that Simon Peter and the beloved disciple had reported, or of the Gardener who turned out to be Jesus, according to Mary Magdalene?

We may not know where he **was**, but we do know where he **wasn't**: where all the action was! He "couldn't believe it" in more ways than one when he finally resurfaced: a) that his friends were telling the truth about being visited by Jesus; b) that he'd missed the excitement, whatever it was. He and the others had hung together for days, and the one time he'd split off, the camel caravan had pulled out of town without him, so to speak.

Bottom line, though? Thomas' absence was more important **for us** than his presence ever could have been. Because we've all doubted, too. Because we've wanted proof in order to risk believing, especially after being hurt: "Once burnt, twice shy," right?

When Jesus says,

"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29),

He could have directed that **not just** to Thomas, but to Mary Magdalene who believed **after** she saw the One she supposed to be the Gardener, and He called her by name, and to all the other disciples who believed **after** the risen Lord passed through the locked door, stood before them, showed them His hands and His side. They believed because they saw, just like Thomas, so he was definitely not in a doubters' club of one.

Tragedies along the Way, in our own or others' lives, may make us doubt God's love, God's power to save, God's presence, God's existence. Who among us doesn't have at least one family member (maybe even a spouse or child), one dear friend, one valued coworker, one not-so-distant neighbor, who labels him or herself either agnostic or atheist? It's **challenging** to pray for loved ones' healing and end up burying them. It's **confusing** to do our best to serve God and neighbor and to get shafted at work or school or in politics or on the playing field. It's **heart-wrenching** to see suffering caused by poverty, pollution, disease, war, violence in the Third World and here at home. People have told me, "This is why I cannot believe in a loving God." But human beings, **not** God, are responsible for those ills and are capable of correcting them.

I'm fine being in the same spiritual wonderers' club as Thomas, honest enough to voice my questions, patient enough to wait for understanding, humble enough to say I don't know it all, wise and resigned enough to say, "At some point, I have to live with and accept

mystery,” especially the mystery of suffering. In one of C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia, The Horse and His Boy*, the boy questions the Lion, Aslan, the Christ figure, about what he considers to be the bad things that have happened to his friend. Aslan tells him that each person is given to understand her or his own story, not anybody else’s....

But let’s not let Thomas’ fleeting doubt overshadow his more important and most amazing confession of faith: “My Lord and my God!” There is no more exalted way that anyone refers to Jesus in the 4th Gospel. “My Lord and my God!” is the way that God is referred to in Hebrew Scripture. Here Jesus is named as God. There’s another chapter of St. John’s Gospel (with the wonderful story about breakfast on the beach) but it’s considered a later addition to the original Gospel. That makes Thomas the last human being to address Jesus in the Gospel, in this most praiseworthy way. His expression of faith is a bookend to John the Baptizer’s announcement at the beginning:

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
(John 1:29)

I love Thomas. He stands invisibly beside me at nearly every graveside, columbarium, memorial garden and mausoleum service at which I preside:

- *“... and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”*
(John 14:3-6)

May we be as boldly, unapologetically, endearingly honest as Thomas. May we also come to the faith that adoringly confesses: *“My Lord and my God!”* Amen

¹On-line *Bible Hub, Smith’s Bible Dictionary*, “Thomas.”

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