

Year A 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter 23 April 2017

Acts 2:14a; 22-32 Psalm 16:5-11 1 Peter 1:3-9 John 20:19-31

Through the written word, and the spoken word, may we know your Living Word Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

Chatty Cathy. Nervous Nellie. Lazy Susan. Doubting Thomas. Unfortunate nicknames --especially if your name is Cathy, Nellie, Susan or Thomas. I am not sure of the origin of the others, but we are all familiar with Doubting Thomas. Why did poor Thomas get the label? Who was he? Why did John write a story about him? The others didn't. Why is the story included in the post resurrection account?

We know the gospel of John is quite different from Matthew, Mark and Luke. The tone is different, more strident, edgy even, than the narrative style of the others. John had a purpose. *But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* John is focussed on demonstrating the divinity of Jesus. The unique stories he tells, about Lazarus, the woman at the well, Nicodemus, are stories of people transformed by believing that Jesus is the Messiah. The story of Thomas is also a story of transformation.

Why Thomas? When John wrote, late in the first century, many witnesses to the resurrection were already dead. There were many different groups of Christians with different leaders, even in the first century. Paul mentions this when he writes the Corinthians (3:4) about the quarrelling between his followers and those of Apollo. There were also disagreements between the followers of Peter and Paul. Paul's answer is that they are just servants, God's co-workers, through whom they came to believe.

Some scholars believe the gospel of John was written in the heat of controversy, to defend certain views of Jesus and to oppose others. How do we know? There is a Gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. Some are similar to what is recorded in the 4 New Testament gospels, but a few are diametrically opposed to what John writes. It is possible John deliberately used the name Thomas to defend his views about Jesus against the Thomas Christians, Christians who followed Thomas. That group of followers believed that there was something of the divine in all of us, enabling **us** to find the way. John insisted only Jesus was divine and the only way to salvation was through Christ.

Thomas was not a proper name, but a nickname in Hebrew for twin, and translated in Greek as Didymus, twin. Thus we read, Thomas (also known as Didymus, or, Thomas (who was called the twin)). But why does John repeat that? If Thomas was a nickname, what was his real name? Again, scholars tell us it is quite possible this disciple's name was Judas, but not Iscariot, and so, to differentiate, the nickname was used.

John tells us about Thomas on several occasions. Thomas is honest, and loyal. When Jesus finally decides to go to the home of Lazarus, despite the danger everyone is aware of, Thomas is

the one who says, *Let us also go, that we may die with him*. It seems he is saying, I am all in, I've gone this far with him...Thomas does believe in Jesus and the precariousness of his mission. Thomas appears next 3 chapters later. In Chapter 14, Jesus is talking about his impending death and ascension. He says, *You know the way to the place I am going*. Thomas says, quite bluntly, he hasn't a clue what Jesus is talking about. Later in the chapter, he misunderstands that Jesus is showing himself only to the disciples. Thomas can't understand how Jesus will show himself to the world if he is in fact going away.

Last week we read how Mary Magdalene recognized Jesus after he spoke her name in the garden outside the tomb. He commissioned her to tell the disciples, which she did. So why do we find them behind locked doors, scared? They haven't put it all together yet. What Jesus kept telling them before he died just didn't make sense – until they saw the risen Lord. Then the light dawned. Thomas was no different but he dared to say he didn't believe until he saw for himself.

Jesus defied their concept of a messiah while he was alive. He did things backward to their way of thinking – certainly unconventionally – eating with tax collectors, talking to Samaritans, washing their feet – unreal, really. Many witnesses didn't believe before they saw the resurrected Jesus. Mary saw him outside the tomb but didn't recognize him until he spoke her name. Peter didn't believe when he saw the empty tomb – not until Jesus appeared in the room.

Luke tells us of the 2 men on the road to Emmaus – they didn't believe until Jesus ate with them. When those two told the 11, Luke writes that they didn't believe. They still doubted when Jesus appeared to them and pointed out the wounds on his hands and feet. Jesus had to eat in front of them to prove he was alive. Really, they all doubted until they saw him. They were no different from Thomas.

Matthew finishes his Gospel with the eleven going to the mountain in Galilee to meet Jesus. Just before Jesus commissions them to go and make disciples of all nations, Matthew writes, *when they (the 11) saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted*.

Thank John for telling us about Thomas, a person who had a very human reaction – doubt – but is a witness for us. If we just had the few words that some disciples doubted and not the story of Thomas we wouldn't know why they didn't get it. We would have all the more reason to doubt. When Thomas got it, he believed.

Thomas doubted because his idea of God didn't mesh with death on a cross. He had to see the pre resurrection Jesus in the post resurrection Jesus. The glorified Jesus. The story of Thomas is a transition point between those who saw and believed and those who will believe without seeing – because of the testimony of the witnesses. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*.

Jesus doesn't give Thomas a hard time for his doubt. No, Jesus foresees the time when all those who come to believe in him will see him as Thomas did—the crucified and risen Lord. Thomas couldn't put it all together until he saw the risen Christ. Thomas couldn't worship a dead Christ until he experienced first hand the exalted one. Same problem with the 2 on the road to Emmaus. The just couldn't understand why the messiah had to suffer and die. If the cross is the stumbling block to faith in Jesus as Lord, its substance lies in the Jewish belief their God is one. When Jesus appeared to Thomas, the crucified one became one with the Father in Thomas's eyes. What was mutually exclusive became inclusive.

Thomas represents the crunch of the why of faith with the what. The what finds its source in the why of it – the necessity of Christ suffering these things so as to enter his glory. Or, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:18, 22–24: *“For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*

Those who were with Jesus were transformed. The woman at the well. Nicodemus. The bleeding woman. The paralyzed man lowered from the roof. Peter – a coward transformed into an enthusiastic, passionate preacher in the face of his own arrest. We read part of his first public sermon today. Jesus was transformed. The whole world was transformed by the witnesses to the resurrection.

What about us? We don't have the opportunity to race to the tomb or live with Jesus and see his works to understand and believe. No, we are 2000 years removed from the event. We do have the evidence of the Gospel writers, of witnesses who saw the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, and then saw the resurrected, glorified Jesus. We have to believe based on the witness of those who did see and believe with our hearts. Christian faith is essentially a question of knowing the person of Jesus, experiencing him in a God who loves us, and accepts us as we are.

Sometimes I think 'cradle Christians,' the ones brought up in a Christian home, are at a disadvantage. Like most of us. Do we have light bulb moments? Or do we believe because our parents did? Because it is expected? Do we really believe? Or do we just go with the flow, confirmed as expected, have our children baptized, participate in the liturgy, recite the creeds. Is there a transformational moment? The aha moment of belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Do we question? Thomas gives us licence to acknowledge our doubts. Some do to the extent they are atheist. Can't reconcile God or Jesus without visible evidence or proof. But they are blind to the presence of Jesus in our world.

Believing is seeing when we understand who God is and what he does. When we are in relationship with God. Praying. John is saying that faith is the basis of salvation. Faith is not just knowing, it is feeling. The transforming essence of faith is more than a cognitive belief. It is experiential. The part about Thomas not understanding how Jesus will show himself to the

world if he is in fact is going away? Thomas was thinking Jesus had to be seen to be believed – both in chapters 14 and 20 – but Jesus says you will see him through love. *Anyone who loves me will be loved by my Father and I too will love them and show myself to them.*

Jesus is present today. We feel his presence, sense his love in the reconciliation between father and son after a year of silence because of harsh words exchanged. It is in the coming together on an Easter Sunday morning of many people grieving the loss of a loved one over the past year; coming together in fellowship in the hope and promise of the resurrection. Jesus' love is seen in the 20.00 left under the coffee cup of a down and out person when he went to the bathroom at McDonalds. It is seen in the miracle of healing witnessed 21 years ago while nursing at the IWK. It is in the employer who takes a chance on an ex convict. In the people who took strangers into their homes when planes landed in Canada on September 11. The refugees settled into communities. It is in the Easter lily that bloomed after Thanksgiving in the garden outside St John's just before the funeral of a man who loved spring and loved flowers.

Those who give and those who receive are touched and transformed in the exchange.

It is human to doubt. Thomas did and wasn't afraid to say so. John wrote so that we would believe. John is adamant that Jesus is the messiah and the story of Thomas helps to prove his point. John wrote so that all may believe – doubters of the first century and doubters of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Seeing is believing but believing is seeing.

Amen

References: Gospel of Thomas, Elaine Pagels. God for a Monday Morning, Bill Hocking. Sundays and Seasons, Year C. Working Preacher Commentary for 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter. Twelve Months of Sundays, NT Wright. Year A Preaching Common Lectionary, M Soards. The Word Today, H. O'Driscoll. Doubt and the Resurrection of Jesus, David J Norman, 2008. Blessed are Those Who Have Not Seen, April De Conick. Easter Sunday Sermon notes.

Other themes possible: sharing of peace. Commission. New definition of faith.