

Fear Not, Thomas – or Fear Not Thomas?

Sermon for 2 Easter A 2023 – Thomas Sunday

Fear not, Thomas – or fear not Thomas? That is the question – a question for us as people of faith and as people of the church and as people who, like me, might from time to time manage to miss great events, be absent when we ought to have been present. Can you imagine being the only one of Jesus’s friends and followers who, on the day he returned, was somewhere else? Missed the great reunion? It reminds me, since we have part of the Noah and flood story as our Old Testament reading this morning, of a cartoon I often see on Facebook and elsewhere, which is a picture of Noah’s ark with the flood coming up, the rains falling, and the doors closing. In the foreground we see dinosaurs talking to unicorns and saying, “Oh! Was that today?” I often fear missing great events, and not being where I should be when I should be. For this reason, and for many others, the story of Thomas rings true to me.

As those of you who’ve heard me preach have often heard me say, Thomas was not some fly-by-night, fare-thee-well, fair-weather friend and follower of Jesus, but quite the opposite. The name that he gets in Greek, Didymus, from which we get “Thomas,” is often translated as “The Twin.” The story comes down to us that he gets this name because he was more like Jesus than anyone else in the world, even Jesus’s own brothers and sisters. They had what sometimes you find in a great and abiding friendship, which is an ability to understand each other’s mind and heart, moods and ways, to anticipate how their sentences will end and also to remember never to finish them for them, knowing another person, and being known, far more deeply and honestly than you’d ever imagine possible. Some people who are twins and triplets have told me that it can be like that: you just know what someone is

feeling. The stories that come down to us tell us that Thomas and Jesus of Nazareth had that kind of closeness.

This, of course, begs the question of where was he, Thomas, that first week, that first day of the week, when they all gathered to see the risen Lord?

The answer is, as scholars far and wide, then and now, old and new all attest, is that we don't know. My guess is, my best guess is, that Thomas was so full of grief that the death, the judicial murder of his friend, his teacher, his rabbi, his Messiah, that he could not bear to be anywhere after that but alone. We know that Judas, the apostle who betrays Jesus to the authorities who then have him killed, could not bear anyone else's company, and could not even bear to live any more, in his grief and disappointment in himself. Thomas, too, I suspect, could not bear to be with anyone as he lived into the stages of grief, and an unimaginable loss, as though part of him had been destroyed.

Eventually, of course, as is the way with all things, he found his way back to the company of his other friends, the other apostles and followers of Jesus, and they told him something unimaginable, so incredible, that he must've looked at them as though they were insane, deluded, even crazed. Perhaps, he thought, their way of being in grief was to not be able to accept that Jesus had died, believing instead the impossible. So he said to them what anyone in his shoes and his condition would say: "Look, fellas: until I put my hands in the wounds on his hands, and feel the wound on his side, no way. No way." If you'da been there, if you'da seen them, I betcha you woulda done the same. I know I would have – not out of a doubt that signals a lack of faith, but a good doubt of what is not possible, for all that we know.

Of course, as the story comes down to us, once Jesus appears again, in those strange post-resurrection stories in which Jesus can walk through walls and fly from Judea to

Galilee in the blink of an eye and all the rest of it, Thomas wastes no time in doing what he said he would do: touching the hands that had been struck with nails, putting his hand in the side that had been pierced by the spear, and knowing instantly by what he saw, what he heard, what he felt, that indeed, the impossible had happened. His friend, his rabbi, his Messiah, his Twin, had returned. Hope, as he has seen it in the eyes and heard it from the lips of his other friends, had indeed been rekindled. Love was again come into the world. Death had not destroyed it. The wicked had not the final victory. The sting of the grave was removed. “My Lord,” he said, “and my God” – as would we, had we been there.

But Thomas’s doubt of the impossible is not a sign of weakness, but intelligence. It is not a sign of doubt in a bad way, but a sign of true understanding of what is, even though it contains an openness to what can be. In that spirit, I urge us to take the story of Thomas as of one of whom we should not be afraid, and of whose doubt we would do well to partake whenever the impossible is set before us. We should ask to know with our eyes and our ears, with what we can feel and know and sense and replicate according to the scientific method, but being willing to accept what our senses tell us, and have faith that the hope we can feel is real.

On this Thomas Sunday, it is also well that we are creatures of a world that existed long before we did, and will exist long after we do. We have, by God’s mysterious grace, the gift of life, as do all other things that live. Much of what remains of what lived before is part and parcel of our world as well, in the fuels we burn, and in the things out of which we make our homes, and the things we consume in order to stay alive. That cycle of life, as far as I can tell, precedes us and will outlast us and is, most likely, though I cannot know for sure, present in other parts of God’s creation, the cosmos, in ways that would be as unfathomable to us, as unimaginable to us, as what

Thomas felt when he heard the first time of the risen Lord, and then again when he saw him with his own eyes.

But even though life goes on, much of it good and some of it quite detrimental to us, we know that we have the power to heal, to help, or to destroy the creation as we know it. We can, as people, make the world a better place, using its resources rightly to the benefit of all, or exploit them selfishly for the benefit of the few and to the ruin of all. We know deep in our hearts that humans, uniquely, have the power to reshape our environment and our world any way we can think of, for either the good or the harm of all that is. We know that the choice to do what is right and good and for the good of all sometimes come at a cost. But no greater cost could there be than to continue to waste and damage what was not ours to throw away in the first place, and what our children and grandchildren will need in order to thrive in the world God made them, and us, to live in in grace, in abundance, and in his glory.

Let us look with the eyes of a Thomas who understands the difference between truth and lie, right and wrong, between what is and what cannot be, and in all hope and with all faith and with all knowledge before us, make of the world the paradise God meant it to be, and not the hell it can so easily become when we selfishly, greedily, cruelly, and short-sightedly, exploit, ruin, and destroy. May we and all those who dwell on this earth have the faith to make it whole, to heal the hurts we've done to it, and to live in it as responsible stewards of creation and servants of a loving God who also was before we were, and will be when our time has come to an end.

May the blessings of Easter continue to be with us. May we continue to be healed and whole, safe and sound, in God's great glory, in the world he died to save, and rose to set free. Amen.