

Fear Not, Thomas – or Fear Not Thomas?

Sermon for 2 Easter B 2024 – Thomas Sunday

Fear not, Thomas – or fear not Thomas? That is the question – a question for us as people of faith, as people of the church, and as people who, like me, from time to time aren't where we should be, for one reason or another. Can you imagine being the only one who'd followed Jesus to Jerusalem, ate that last supper with him, shared the bread, drank from the cup he poured, went with him to the garden and all that happened after that, but never rejoined the others? Thus, on the day he returned, happened to be somewhere they were not? It reminds me of a cartoon I see sometimes online. It's a drawing of Noah's ark in the distance, the rains falling, the flood starting, and the animals going in, two by two. In the foreground are two dinosaurs. Seeing what's going on dockside, one asks the other, "Oh! Was that today?" I often fear missing great events, losing things better left un-lost, or 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.

Thomas was not some fly-by-night, fair-weather follower of Jesus; quite the opposite. The name that he gets in Greek is Didymus. From it, somehow, we get "Thomas," though 'Didymus' is more properly translated as "The Twin." Thomas gets this name because he was more like Jesus than anyone else, even Jesus's own brothers and sisters. They had what sometimes you find in a great and abiding friendship: the 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. It happens when you know someone, and are known by them, 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. Some married persons have marriages like it. Some friendships have this scope and power. It's beautiful when it happens, not least because we can't plan for it or anticipate it. We can just be open to it should it happen. One of the great things about becoming human as Jesus did was to be able to have a friendship like he had with Thomas Didymus, his emotional twin.

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

The answer is, as scholars far and wide, old and new all attest, is that we don't know. 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 with anyone else. He had to be alone. Grief can be like that. After all, Judas's grief and self-loathing after helping the bad people arrest and show-trial Jesus to death were so great that he had to be alone – and then couldn't stand even to be alive. Thomas, though he had done nothing wrong, I suspect could not bear to be with anyone either. He had to enter the stages of grief and unimaginable loss alone. Part of him had died on the cross with Jesus, and that part had not come back to life. He thought it never would.

Eventually, of course, Thomas made his way back to the company of his other friends, the other apostles and followers of Jesus. When he got there, they told him something unimaginable, so incredible, that he must've looked at them as though they were insane. Perhaps, he thought, their grief

is so great that they can't accept that Jesus has died, and cling instead to hopes impossible. That is why 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, Thomas is fine. Though Jesus Raised is not quite the same as Jesus Condemned, Thomas has no problem with him. As the first fruits of them that sleep, Jesus can walk through walls and fly from Judea to Galilee in the blink of an eye, and make fish for breakfast when no-one else can catch even a herring. None of this surprises any of his followers, however. Indeed, when he sees and hears him this time, though, Thomas wastes no time in doing what he said he would do. He touches the hands that had been struck with nails. He puts his hand in the side that spear had pierced. He knows, now, that it's all true. His friend, his rabbi, his Messiah, his Twin, has returned. Hope is alive again. Love is come again; death has 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 have, had we been there.

Thomas's doubt of the impossible is not a sign of weakness. It's a sign of intelligence. It is not a sign of doubt in a bad way, but a sign of understanding what is, yet being open to what could be. Thus, Thomas's story is one of which we should not be afraid. We should join in his doubt

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 ala science's many methods. We should be willing to accept what our senses tell us, and have yet faith that the hope we can feel is real.

We live in an age, sadly, where people often get this sort of thing backwards. There are too many who will believe not the evidence of their senses or the reasons given them by reasonable people, when they do not like what sense or reason show. Too many would rather follow charlatans who flatter and lie to them instead. One reason why is that what Jesus says next – 'Blessed are they who have not seen but believed' – has so often been weaponized and turned an affirmation of faith and trust into something quite destructive of it and of those who hold to it.

No, it's not doubting the impossible that shows a lack of faith. It's doubting those who are telling the truth, even when that truth that seems impossible. When Thomas first doubted what he could not believe – that Jesus had been raised from the dead – he didn't simply doubt that this had happened. He doubted, or could not accept, the testimony of those who had seen it with their own eyes and been changed by it. He could not see that change in their eyes, or hear it in their words. He could not tell in them the difference between honesty and delusion. Grief, I suspect, clouded his judgment. This was likely the same difficulty that the male disciples had in believing the women who first saw the empty tomb and learned why it was empty. They did not believe the testimony of those who had witnessed these things for real and were not lying about them. That is, they could not tell the truth when it hit them in the face. They could not perceive whether

those telling them the truth were in fact doing so. It was that lack of faith – their lack of faith in those who had given them no reason to doubt them – that Jesus found wanting in Thomas, and by extension in the rest of them. If you cannot tell who among you to trust, my followers, my friends, with whom I ate my last supper and have my last lesson, ‘love one another as I have loved you’, then what are we to do? What are we doing here?

The point is not that those who witnessed the resurrected Jesus were to be believed simply because they said so. The point is that those who really saw this really said so to people they knew well, and who knew them well. The latter should have been able to see the truth in their eyes that they had seen what they said they’d seen. They should have known them that well, and known how to look for that truth – and that those who followed Jesus would never lie to one another. How could you lie to those whom he told you to love as he did? Why is that even a question?

Yet it was a question, even at the beginning, as it is now. Churches, like all human communities, have had to learn how to deal with deceivers without and within, and how to tell the difference between those who are honest with them and those who are pulling the wool over their eyes. Woe to them who cannot, or do not. It’s a sad commentary in and of itself that those who call themselves Christians have not behaved in such a way as to make it axiomatic that we are as trustworthy, honest, and reliable as he wanted us to be and empowered us to become. Yet from the earliest days of the Jesus movement to today’s Elmer Gantrys and others who bow to the Golden Calf of Sexually Predatory Oathbreaking Insurrection, there have always been those in as well as outside the church who betray everything

Jesus stood for and said to do. It is they who often accuse us of lying when we tell them the truth about such things as the idol they worship and the evil that it has done and intends to do. It may be our task to call them out, as Jesus did Thomas. It may also be our task to restore them to faith in a God who is love, who acts with compassion and mercy, and drew all people to himself, no matter where they were from, whom they love, or who they have come to be.

On this Thomas Sunday, it is well to remember 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. But we're more aware of that gift than pretty much anything else that lives. What should we do with the life that is given to us? Love it, believe in it, and use it to share truth, spread hope, and show mercy. Heal the hurts of the world, and stop those who are causing those hurts from causing any more of them. Easier said than done, but then so is: 'Love one another as I have loved you'.

We know that we have the power to heal, to help, or to destroy the world as we know it. We can't destroy other worlds, not yet; our power is at least limited in that way. We can, if we choose, make the world a better place, using its resources rightly to the benefit of all. We can, instead, exploit them selfishly for the benefit of the few and to the ruin of all. We know that people, uniquely, have the power to change our world for either the good or the harm of those who have to live here. We know that the choice to do what is right and good may come at a cost. But no greater cost could there be than 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 us all to live in in grace, in abundance, and in his glory.

Let us look with the eyes that Thomas had at the end, when he understood not only the difference between truth and lie, but also whom to trust was telling him the truth, and why. Let us then do with that new knowledge and freedom as Thomas did: in hope, with faith, and empowered by what we know, make the world the paradise God meant it to be. Fear not, Thomas – and fear not Thomas. We can learn what he learned and do as he did as well. Amen.