

SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR B, APRIL 11, 2021
ACTS 2:14, 22-32; PSALM 16; 1 PETER 1:3-9; JOHN 20:19-31

RETHINKING THOMAS



John 20:19-31 [When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to 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." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 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 have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.]

The first church I served as a priest bore the name of St. Thomas, whose poignant story we hear each year on this Second Sunday of Easter. About a year into my time at St. Thomas I received a call after midnight by a parishioner named Mary who had just learned her husband's tractor trailer rig lost control around a curve in the Ozark Mountains of Northwest Arkansas. He was pronounced dead at the scene. Mary was calling to ask if I would accompany her to the funeral home where his body had been taken.

I thought we were going principally to make decisions about his burial, but on arrival she said before she could plan anything, she needed to see his body. She needed that to know he was really dead. Seeing was believing.

The funeral home attendant discouraged this in the wee hours of that morning, which I knew from years of Emergency Room work meant that the blunt trauma from the accident would be tough for a loved one to see. His resistance was motivated by compassion. Mary persisted though, and turned to me with tears in her eyes and said, "Father Steve, will you go with me?"

I think of Mary each year on this Second Sunday of Easter when we hear Thomas moved by his own need for proof—of

resurrection after death. How incredible is that!

Mary's story hopefully offers us a glimpse into her humanity, and ours—that in the wake of loss so jarring, it cannot seem real. We need proof when things too hard to believe come our way. Can you hear Mary's plea with a full heart of compassion for her? What about Thomas' plea then?

I will tell you holding Mary as she sobbed that dark night, in a dark room, with the smell of diesel, sweat and blood intermingled in the heavy air, stands as one of the holiest moments of my life. The community of Christ holding onto one another, with Christ breathing grace into the liminal moment. It was Mary's courage, not doubt, that made that moment possible, and I will hold her forever in my heart as a result.

For a long time I thought Thomas just happened to be unlucky in his timing, out for a grocery run for the group when Jesus showed up the first time. "We have seen the Lord," the others reported, exactly the same as the women who arrived at the empty tomb earlier in the day. Thomas just missed it. And his demand for proof seemed a bit too insistent, for the others there, and perhaps for us too, even though a compassionate Christ apparently has no qualms with supplying

what Thomas needs a week later, which is to say, in the fullness of time for Thomas to experience conversion.

Lately, however, I think rather than simply missing the moment that first Easter because he happened to be out and about, it is more likely that Thomas fell away from the community a few days earlier, perhaps when Jesus was arrested, or after they took his lifeless body down from the cross as Thomas watched from a safe distance, masking his identity as one of his followers.

Whether he had parted ways with the community, or just needed to linger in the shadows—he was trying to sort it all out. What now? Life would take him on to next things, even if they were not yet clear. But he gets wind of Jesus appearing to the others, and it draws him back into the community's orbit. A bumpy ride ensues as he seeks to reenter that atmosphere. "Unless I can put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

He's been given the moniker Doubting Thomas for saying this, although nowhere in the passage does the word for doubt appear. It is also noteworthy that as the risen Jesus appears to him a week later, and invites him to place his finger in his wounds, and his hand in his side, there is no mention that

Thomas actually does so, or even needs to. The scene moves straightaway to a courageous confession, My Lord and my God! There is no more remarkable declaration made by anyone in the gospels, and I'd like to think it was the moment in which the community knew Thomas had returned, had come home, and with compassion welcomed him back.

And lest we think Jesus then upbraids Thomas with a snide remark about seeing and believing, it might be helpful to know that, in John's gospel, believing has nothing to do with credal statements or doctrinal emphasis; believing, rather, is synonymous with relationship with Jesus. Thomas is invited into the fully restored relationship with Jesus, risen and breathing blessings of peace in his direction, and in the direction of all of us who will follow without seeing the bodily Jesus, but nevertheless invited into the fullness of the relationship. Can we trust that this Risen Christ has sufficient love and mercy and peace to go around, for that first Easter community, for Thomas, and for every one of us, no matter what our doubts are, no matter our desire for proof?

Maybe we are so captivated with Thomas' disbelief as the fulcrum to pry this story open because focusing there somehow helps validate our own disbelief when it comes to

matters of faith. If that is the case, then perhaps we might call him Courageous Thomas, rather than Doubting Thomas, because he speaks into the dark night of his disbelief and pleads for some sign. That takes courage.

How many of us leave our questions to rumble in the belly of disbelief rather than release them into the vulnerable air of spoken uncertainty? There's a risk in giving voice to them.

Or how many of us have whittled away at credal statements with our proof-minded ways, only to render a faith that leaves little room for real relationship with this risen Jesus? There's a reason why these gospel encounters take place in locked rooms of fear. This is our story, folks.

The word for believing occurs 90 times in the gospel of John, and always as a verb moving across the scene. Somehow, somewhere along the way, for many of us, believing stopped and sat down and became sedentary statements about Jesus rather than relationship with Jesus. It's no wonder we would struggle with believing all this then.

We hear this story on the Second Sunday of Easter every year, a week later—that is, in the fullness of time for conversion to unfold before our eyes—for us, who, like Thomas, and Mary, are just trying to sort things out and figure a way forward.

So let's be gentle with the likes of Mary, who speaks courageously into the dark room where death lingers but Christ does too.

Let's be gentle with the likes of Thomas, who speaks courageously into the dark room where resurrection breaks in, and changes everything.

Let's be gentle with one another, as we courageously speak our unbeliefs into the spaces where the air of faith hangs heavy, stagnant even, and see if it might come alive again, as verbs moving across the scene into life-giving relationship with the Risen Christ.

And be gentle with yourself, my friends, as you give voice to whatever you need to believe. This risen Christ can handle whatever you have to bring, and will bless it, and bless you, in the fullness of time you need to make sense of it all.

ⁱ Rembrandt's "Doubting Thomas." <https://www.artbible.info/art/large/532.html>