

## Thomas Our Twin

John 20:24-29

He has been called “Doubting Thomas” in Christian tradition and popular imagination. The Gospel of John calls him “Thomas the twin”. Wouldn’t you have loved to have met the other twin? The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, a very important early gospel that did not make it into the New Testament, describes him as *Jesus’* twin. Spiritually speaking, I think. Soul mates, “womb-mates” in the Spirit. Thomas may be our twin too! Let’s look.

Abraham Lincoln, who perhaps had the most profound faith of any American President, saw Thomas as his twin. As a young man he found it hard to swallow the rigid doctrines of his conservative boyhood Baptist churches. Early on he wrote what he named “A Little Book on Infidelity” which was not what it sounds like! It voiced his skepticism about the narrow orthodoxy of the brand of Christianity he had been taught. Later his friends, fearing that the book might tarnish his reputation and hinder his political career, had it burned. Later in life Lincoln wrote in a letter to a friend:

Probably it is my lot to go on in a twilight, feeling and reasoning my way through life as questioning, doubting Thomas did.<sup>1</sup>

## I

We might well consider the positive function of doubt in our faith. Without doubt faith can become a deadly certainty. Doubt saves faith from fanaticism. We move from faith to faith, from a less adequate faith, or no longer adequate faith, to a faith more adequate to our lives. Doubt helps us in this movement toward a deeper, more comprehensive faith.

Frederick Buechner has written a lot about the role of doubt in our faith. “Doubts”, he says, “are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving”.<sup>2</sup>

In an interview Buechner spoke of the Christians who want him to declare more certainty about his faith:

They want me to come out and say, “Look, it’s all true!” And of course I do believe it’s true with ninety-eight percent of myself, but I want to be true to the experience of truth, which always includes the possibility that maybe you’re just kidding yourself.

In another place he poignantly writes: “If there were no room for doubt there would be no room for me.” Perhaps Thomas is our twin. He gives us a place to *be* along our journey of faith.

## II

Thomas gets his name “Thomas the Doubter” or “Doubting Thomas”, from our text today. I do not think it is fair to peg him in that way.

The Risen Christ had appeared to the other disciples the Sunday before, Easter evening, in that room behind locked doors. Thomas was not there. (Do you ever feel like you have just missed the real thing, the thing you’ve been waiting, longing for?) The disciples went to Thomas and said, “We have seen the Lord!” And Thomas said,

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.

I do not know why some single him out for special reprobation here. Luke’s account of Easter reports that when Mary Magdalene and the other women with her went to the disciples and told them what had happened at the tomb, they had this reaction, “...these words seemed like as idle tale to them, and they did not believe them.” (Luke 24:11).

We might call Thomas an empiricist, a realist. He counted the votes. If he had taken the Myers Briggs Personality Inventory he probably would have come out as an ISTJ: Introvert, Sensing, Thinking, Judging. These folks make good scientists, doctors, professors, airplane pilots. Truth has to do with the evidence,

what you can see, touch, measure. Like Joe Friday the detective on the old show Dragnet: “Just the facts, ma’am!”

For Thomas this intuition stuff was for the birds. When Jesus talked in metaphor, Thomas’ eyes glazed over. Metaphor, Smetaphor! Speak in prose, please, Jesus, not your poetry.

### III

But there was more to Thomas than this one episode. (Who wants to be named, defined by one moment of one day in your life?) In John 11 Jesus was told that his close friend Lazarus was near death. He told his disciples, “Let’s go to Judea again!” That is, Bethany where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived. Given the growing opposition to him there and fearing danger to their own lives, the disciples drew back in fear.

But not Thomas! He said, “Lord, let us go there that we may die with you!” He was a realist, he knew the danger, but he was ready to follow Jesus even to his own death. Does that sound like “Thomas the Doubter?” Maybe better, Thomas the Lion-hearted.

Then there was the scene in John 14 where Jesus was talking to his bewildered and already grieving disciples:

Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Abba's house are many rooms.... I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am you shall be also.

Then Jesus added, "And you know the way where I am going." It was Thomas, honest, brave Thomas who said,

Lord, we do not know where you are going! How can we know the way?

There may have been others among the disciples that day who wanted to ask the question, but it was Thomas who did.

Then Jesus said, and here come his metaphors again: "I Am the Way, the Truth, the Life." Did the metaphors begin to sink in? *Jesus the Way, Jesus the Truth, Jesus the Life.* Which suggests to me that as we walk Jesus' path alongside him, as we let him live his life in us, we discover the Truth and experience the Life he brings.

#### IV

Which leads us back to our text in John. The disciples had earlier run to Thomas and described how they had experienced the presence of the Risen Jesus: And Thomas said, I must see for myself, touch for myself.

And Jesus did not begrudge Thomas his need. (He begrudges us none of our needs.) I love Jesus here. He meets us all exactly at our deepest point of need. Jesus appeared to Thomas the next Sunday. He was there with the other disciples, but it was as if they were the only two in the room.

Jesus said to him: “Put your finger here and see my hands.” Seeing as touching! Jesus offering to Thomas what his empiricist self needed. “Reach you hand here and put it in my side.” Then Jesus’ words which have given Thomas his name: “Do not doubt but believe.” Literally, do not be unbelieving but believing.” Move, Thomas, into a new realm of believing!

Then Thomas cried out his confession of faith, faith in the Living Christ: “My Lord and my God!” Before in their earthly life together Jesus was “Lord” as “Master”, “Teacher”. Now Jesus has become in the Resurrection part of the divine life of God, and now Thomas enters into a new mode of believing: “My Lord and my God.”

The text leaves out one tantalizing detail. It does not say whether Thomas, invited to touch Jesus’ wounds, actually did. Whatever happened that moment, it was enough.

Jesus invites us all to bring our questions and doubts to him, all of them, so that our faith may grow into a deeper dimension. We can bring our deepest doubts and questions to church and haul them down the aisle, all the way to the altar.

The Spanish philosopher, Miguel Unamuno wrote:

Those who believe in God but believe without passion in their hearts, without anguish in their minds, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the idea of God, not in God himself.

This is how Thomas believed. This is the doubt of faith. This is faith lived *full out* in the midst of life, with all its perplexities, its absurdities, with all its darkness which confounds us.

My own deepest questions, the ones which trouble me at night, are not about Christian doctrine. They are about the presence of evil in a world created in the goodness of God; they are about the suffering of the innocent; they are about the seeming randomness of life as it deals out life and death, about tragedy which strikes so indiscriminately. So the spiritual challenge of my life is about forging meaning in such a world, and finding the hope to make this world better.

There are those I know and love who are “faithful agnostics.” They live a good and faithful life even in their *not-knowing*, which is what agnostic means.

Doubt, questions, uncertainty: they are the very stuff of faith that keep faith alive and moving.

## VI

Whatever changed inside of Thomas that day was profound. It mobilized him to spread the gospel of Jesus using all his prodigious gifts. Thomas the Doubter had become Thomas the Evangelist who took the gospel to India.

Tradition and legend tell us some of the story, what Paul Harvey used to call, “the rest of the story.”

He traveled to India and founded the first Christian church there in 52 C.E., on the coast of Kerala. Over the next twenty years he traversed the entire expanse of India setting up churches. He died a martyr, as he once proclaimed he was willing to be. Today there are approximately 27 million Christians in India who trace their origins to Thomas the Apostle. They call themselves “Thomasine Christians.”

## VII

Maybe you are one of those, Thomasine Christians, and Thomas your twin. Maybe you’ve been afraid to voice your questions, and bring them to church. Or

maybe you have found this church and made it your own because we can bring all parts of ourselves here: our doubts, our questions, our sorrows, our fears, our hopes and joys, and the best love we can.

Jesus, in our text, looked up at his disciples in the room with Thomas and said, “*Blessed are those*, meaning us, meaning those who will come after those first disciples, *blessed are those who have not seen but have come to believe*.”

Yes, you and me, with our searching questions, our doubt, our despair, our anguish, we can come more and more to believe.

Thomasine Christians! There is room for you here today.

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1. As cited in Allen Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), p. 463

2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 20.