

TITANIC DOUBTS

Psalm 133 & John 20: 19-31
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One hundred twelve years ago this April 14 the RMS Titanic left the port of Southampton, England on her maiden voyage.

She stopped briefly at Cherbourg, France and Queenstown, Ireland and then headed out to sea toward New York City. Built from 1910-1911 in Belfast and operated by the White Star Line, she was the largest and fastest passenger ship that had ever sailed and she was considered to be the very utmost in comfort and luxury with a gymnasium, a heated swimming pool, a library, state of the art restaurants, one of the first wireless telegraph systems in the world, and cabins that created a new definition of the word "opulence." A single first-class ticket cost \$4,700 – the equivalent, today of about \$50,000.

She carried 2,224 people – passengers and crew – including some of the wealthiest and most famous people in the world as well as about 1,000 immigrants from Great Britain, Scandinavia and across Europe, seeking a new life in the United States.

What captain Edward Smith, his crew, and the those responsible for plotting Titanic's route did not realize was that three months earlier, on January 4 of that year, the moon and sun lined up in such a way that their gravitational pulls enhanced each other. At the same time, the moon's approach to the earth that January was the closest in 1,400 years and it occurred within six minutes of a full moon.

These "once in many lifetimes" occurrences, all happening at the same time, exerted such a strong gravitational pull upon the earth that the ebb and flow of the tides were changed.

Normally, Greenland icebergs become stuck in the shallow waters off Labrador and Newfoundland and cannot move further south until they melt and shrink and a high tide frees them. That year, however, the tide was so high that the icebergs were freed before they shrank and the tidal currents caused by the strange alignment of the celestial bodies pushed them as much as 400 miles south of where they normally would have been at that time of year.

Over the course of the next five days Titanic would receive **six** telegraph warnings about icebergs in their path including one from the USS California saying they were at a dead stop, surrounded by icebergs and unable to move, but Captain Smith and his telegraph operators would scoff at and even rebuke the ships for crowding the airwaves by sending the warnings when Titanic had messages that her wealthy and important passengers wanted sent to their friends and families in England and the states. Eventually, Captain Smith, worn down by all the warnings, would change his course in a southward direction but it would be too little too late.

In 1912, prudence and safe ocean travel dictated that the appropriate speed for negotiating an ice field where icebergs were present was nine knots. On the night of April 14, 1912, one hundred years ago this month, after receiving six separate warning of icebergs in her path,

RMS Titanic entered an ice field about 375 miles south of Newfoundland at the speed of 22 ½ knots, more than twice the normal speed, and struck an iceberg at 11:40 pm (GMT). The iceberg tore a horizontal rip in the side of the ship and caused the steel plates to buckle inward, opening five of her sixteen watertight compartments to the 31-degree F. water of the Atlantic.

Having been told of the new, watertight compartments that would keep the ship afloat at a time such as this, the crew did not panic; neither did they begin moving passengers to the lifeboats. When the “abandon ship,” announcement was finally made, panic erupted and many of the lifeboats were launched prematurely. Indeed, 472 lifeboat seats went unoccupied. But even had every available lifeboat seat been taken the loss of life would have been high. With 2,224 passenger and crew, Titanic carried lifeboats for only 1,178 persons.

At 2:20 am (GMT), April 15, about two and a half hours after striking the iceberg, Titanic broke up and sank with 1,513 people still on board, nearly all of whom died from hypothermia within minutes of entering the frigid water.

About three hours later the RMS Carpathia entered the ice field doing about 9 knots and rescued 710 passengers from the lifeboats and one survivor from the water, a baker named Charles Joughin who was reported to have been drunk at the time.

Since the discovery of the wreck of the Titanic in 1985 and the recovery of many of her artifacts, the great ship has been reborn as a cultural icon. Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been and continue to be written about her. James Cameron’s 1997 movie still holds the record for the most awards of any movie ever made. It was re-released in 3-D in 2012, on the 100th anniversary of the catastrophe.

The lessons which come from Titanic’s story are legion and the number of sermon illustrations which one might easily draw from Titanic trivia are endless. But the issues that strike us as we explore our scripture lesson for this week are the issues of hubris and skepticism.

Had the builders, passengers and crew of Titanic owned a little less pride even a small measure of Thomas’s skepticism and doubt, the great ship and 1,513 lives might have been saved.

THOMAS, THE SKEPTIC

I don’t know if your experience of Thomas is the same as mine was back in my Sunday School days.

He was always depicted as something of a “bad boy.” Teachers said his name with a tsk-tsk and a wag of the head. We were all warned repeatedly that to be a “Doubting Thomas” was a bad thing. We were to accept, “on faith” those things theological and religious which our minds might lead us to question.

That's what good, Christian boys and girls did.

But I was not such a "good Christian boy." I always wondered if it was really as simple as that.

Let's take a closer look. Let's examine not just this one episode but all of the places where Thomas is mentioned by name and see what we can infer about his character from those references.

In the synoptic, or similar gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) Thomas is mentioned only as one of the apostles who is present on several different occasions. They do not single him out in any way.

It is only in the fourth gospel, John, that Thomas steps forward onto center stage and that happens just four times.

The first occasion is in the 11th chapter of John where Jesus has been hounded out of Jerusalem and he and the twelve have fled to the safety of the countryside. Almost immediately, word comes to them that Lazarus is ill and near death, but Lazarus's home is in Bethany a suburb of Jerusalem.

Heedless of the danger, Jesus wants to go back to be with his friend but his disciples try to dissuade him from going. It is Thomas, alone, who swallows his fear and volunteers to go with Jesus back into the danger of Jerusalem. In verse 16 he says: "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

In other words, "Let's go with him and if we die, we die." By this we know that **Thomas is courageous.**

The second time Thomas steps into the spotlight is in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday evening. (John 14)

Jesus is preparing his disciples for his coming departure and says: *"I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going."*

We imagine the disciples nodding their heads as though they understand everything Jesus is talking about and us with them. But Thomas is not comfortable with assumptions and inferences. He needs for things to be said directly and, if we are honest, we are grateful when he says to Jesus: *"Lord, we do **not** know where you are going; how can we know the way?"*

Thanks to Thomas, Jesus is required to answer plainly and explicitly: *"I am the way, the truth and the life..."*

By this we know that **Thomas is honest and straightforward.**

The third and fourth times that Thomas is noted are the two occasions that we have read this morning.

The eleven surviving disciples (Judas has already committed suicide) are huddled in the locked room where they met with Jesus on Thursday, nearly a week after his death. They have locked the doors and huddled together out of fear, but Thomas is not with them. We are not surprised. If fear is their only reason for being there you can count Thomas out. As we have seen, fear is not a determinative emotion for him. Jesus appears to those who were in the locked room and, when they tell Thomas about it, he is skeptical. He needs evidence. Certainly, he is not seeing any such evidence in the behavior of the disciples. They are still huddled together in fear. No, he wants something more convincing, something physical that he can see and touch.

By this we know that **Thomas is skeptical of human claims.**

A week later we see Thomas singled out for the last time.

Jesus appears again in the locked room and this time Thomas is present. Jesus provides him with the physical evidence he requires and, upon seeing and feeling it, he confesses that he is now a believer.

By this account we know that **Thomas is teachable.**

TITANIC DOUBT

This morning, two historic events – the Locked Room and the RMS Titanic -- meet in a vortex of meaning for us if we will let them. Myth becomes metaphor. The stories that have been told through the years about Titanic and Thomas co-mingle to provide us with insight into the life of faith.

For instance: The builders and operators of RMS Titanic never claimed that it was unsinkable. That word was not used until after the tragedy and then only in the American press. But it does not change the fact that those who were responsible for the ship and the safety of those aboard acted as though it was unsinkable. Their behavior was marked with arrogance and pride.

This was the gilded age when the impossible was being accomplished on a regular basis. The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 (The White City), the creation of New York City's Central Park, the Flat Iron Building in Manhattan, Union Station in Washington, D.C. are just a few of the accomplishments of this era. Others include the first skyscrapers and George Ferris's Giant Wheel, 140 feet tall with 36 cars, each carrying 60 passengers, the works of Emily Dickenson and Mark Twain, and the Social Gospel Movement in American Protestantism.

There was not a soul who didn't believe that the world was getting better through human achievement and the sky was the limit. Doubt and pessimism were simply not allowed. Skepticism was simply unpatriotic, even un-Christian.

It would take extreme experiences of pain and doubt to shake the Pollyanna optimism of the Gilded Age.

The White City which so mesmerized the crowds at the Chicago World's Fair would turn out to be mostly facade, gone after the fair closed in a fraction of the time it took to build it.

Later it would be discovered that the fair had been haunted by a serial killer, one Dr. H.H. Holmes who lured as many as 200 fair goers into his castle, a ramshackle hotel from which they never emerged.

The War to End all Wars would teach the world about mechanized death on a massive scale and would send home young men traumatized, shaken, and wounded not just in their bodies but in their souls by the horrors they had witnessed.

And the sinking of the Titanic would put a giant crack in the people's confidence in the ability of science and industry to solve the problems of the world.

Before she sailed, only one person ever expressed any doubt about Titanic and that was Chief Officer Henry Wilde who wrote, in a letter to his sister: "I still don't like this ship. I have a queer feeling about it." But his doubts were never voiced aloud until after the tragedy. After the sinking, the doubts became legion and the fears generated by that horrible night sparked new rules and regulations for safety at sea that are still in effect today.

A reasonable skepticism, especially when confronted with human boasts and claims, as Thomas was, is always and altogether appropriate. It is a guard against hubris, that excessive pride which has, historically, often preceded our undoing.

Another, for instance: Even though Thomas's skepticism was reasonable and appropriate, when he was confronted with undeniable evidence, he allowed himself to be convinced. He was teachable.

That seems simple, doesn't it? But, in fact, it is a very rare thing in human experience. A few years ago doctors Brendan Nyhan (University of Michigan) and Jason Reifler (Georgia State University) coined the phrase "backfire effect" for a phenomenon they discovered in social research. Put simply, they discovered that when people are presented with absolute evidence that what they thought was true was not true, they do not abandon their belief in the thing that has been proven untrue. Instead, they tend to cling to their untrue belief even more fiercely.

The study has been replicated dozens of times and the "backfire effect" always turns out to hold true. Provide irrefutable evidence to a person that they are wrong and, more than half the time, they will cling to their wrong belief even more tightly than they did before.

The crew of the Titanic was warned SIX TIMES that they were headed toward an ice field containing huge icebergs. At the very least you would think that she would have slowed down a little. She did not. In fact, she sped up to nearly three times the speed recommended for such a situation.

There had never been icebergs at that position at that time of year, so there couldn't possibly be any there now. Even with six reports to the contrary from eye witnesses, Captain Smith could not believe what he was being told because it had never happened before.

THE LEAP OF FAITH

John closes the account of the disciples in the locked room with some words from Jesus that have often been taken as a rebuke of Thomas but are, in fact not so much a criticism of Thomas as a praise of the early church. *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed (fortunate) are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."* (John 20:29)

Hear the words, "come to believe."

That is, they have been teachable. The early Christians are not credited with believing instantly upon hearing the story of Jesus. They have heard the accounts, come to know the people, seen the Spirit at work in the community of faith, felt that same Spirit at work in their own lives, weighed the evidence that was available to them and then taken a leap of faith.

The story of Thomas and the story of Titanic are cautionary tales for us.

They invite us to take a leap of faith, not in our own cleverness, our own abilities, our own accomplishments and achievements, but in the grace and love of God.

They invite us to remember that, no matter how far we reach and how high we climb, we are dependent, fragile creatures who need to be cared for by God and each other.

They invite us to recall that, in the final analysis, our souls are healed not by the achievements of our hands but by the scars in the hands of the master.

This morning, we stand on the docks of the New York harbor waiting for a ship that will never arrive.

We stand before a savior who has arrived when we thought he never would.

And we hear anew the words of the poet Edward Shillito in his beautiful poem, "Jesus of the Scars:"

JESUS OF THE SCARS

By Edward Shillito, upon surviving the horrors of WWI

If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.

If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;
We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.

The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.