

## Thomas as found in the Gospel according to John 20:19-31

I am grateful for the opportunity to stand here this morning as the North side of our little sanctuary and not just sit in the back row as I usually do. It means I had to do a good deal more preparation than I do to worship here. When Jan asked me to preach once during the spring time, it was to allow her time to take Aaron to the school of his choice for the next four years, and I willingly agreed.

I did not know the text when she asked me, nor did I know when I was reminded last week to speak here today, but the research regarding Thomas was a challenge to me.

I have never preached on this text before in the 45 years since my own ordination and the two courses I took years ago on the Gospel according to John never got to the post resurrection stories. Of course, like you I had heard this scripture read and maybe even heard a sermon on the text, but as you may guess, that is not quite the same as standing here to preach about it. I discovered that I had bought a commentary by R. Bultman some 38 years ago and I worked through his comments on Thomas, and to him I am thankful.

What do we know about Thomas from reading about him in the Gospels?

He is mentioned in all four gospels MT 20:2, Mark 3:16-19 Luke 6:14-16 (again by Luke in Acts 1:1-3 three times by John as we shall see in a moment.

There is a book that did not get in the NT called The Acts of Thomas. The author of that book regards Judas Thomas as the twin of Jesus himself and is known in the Syrian Orthodox church.

In a class this semester I was trying to see what students know about Jesus before I started to lecture. They had an exam on Friday to write down 12 steps in the life of Jesus. One step I had them learn was “the calling of the disciples” just after his Baptism (M 4:19(“come and follow me, and I will make you fishers of men) ; Mk 1:17(the same as Mt. but he lists the twelve by name 2:13 including “Thomas: ); John 1:29 “come and you will see” but has a word of invitation for several,, but not yet for Thomas.

The evangelist whose gospel carries the name John, he alone narrates to story of Jesus meeting with his disciples and Thomas showing some suspicion.

Thomas overcomes his suspicion by the end of the short story, 155 words, count them!

And he affirms “My master and my lord.” Tradition has it that Thomas thereafter traveled Eastward, while Andrew goes to Scotland and Peter to Rome. In fact, I went to the church in India that was built on the very spot where Indians believe that Thomas died as he tried to convert the people of that sub-continent to Christianity. He then would become a martyr, whatever John tells about him in the text today. In the Acts of Thomas, I mentioned a minute ago, there is textual support that Thomas went to India, and died there, but his body was carried to Mesopotamia. By the third century Christianity did get to India, but contemporary scholars cannot demonstrate that Thomas, the disciple, got there (E. P Blair “Thomas” IDB)

Do try to remember that, he was not forever “doubting Thomas.’ A Christian, a priest, with a very Indian face and a wonderful command of English told us that that church in Madras was one of only two churches in Christendom that was sacred because an apostle (even a disciple) of Jesus had gone to that place, preaching Christianity, and dying in the very city in which the disciple was remembered. Do you know the other one? Peter in Rome, hence St. Peter’s Church as it is called just across the street from where the Pope lives today.

But back to Thomas, in 1959 The Gospel of Thomas was published by Harper and Row from a Coptic text found a few years before by A. Guillaumont which surprised Christians everywhere around the world, maybe even in Egypt, where Coptic has been spoken for the last 2,000 years. It opens “These are the secret words with the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote....some lines of the 55 pages sound familiar “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven (Thomas Log. 54, sounds like Luke) from the Sermon on the Plain and the story of the good man who had a vineyard (Thomas, Log. 65) . But we find some strange lines such as ending Mary our “because women are not worthy of the Life...so she must be made male that she may “become a living spirit resembling you males....(Thomas Log 114)...that should make all the females in this sanctuary be glad the gospel according to Thomas was not canonized with the 4 more famous gospel in the History of Christianity

But the story as told by John about Thomas is unique in the gospel tradition is an important one. Yes, I could feel the witness of Thomas this week as I prepared these comments. I think Thomas represents the early church which had many people who would have doubted the Resurrection. Mark ends his gospel with the lines “they were very afraid” As Sylvia acted out last week.

What we use as a creed about Jesus, that he was crucified, dead and buried on the third day he rose from the dead' has been established since the 4<sup>th</sup> century as a statement of belief. But in that jump from death to his resurrection.....Thomas had not experienced.

I think he was still in a form of grief when he was reported as having said, "unless I see the marks of he nails in his hands, and put my finger into the marks of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe it" he was asking for what all thinking people might say....not just one disciple of the 12.....he was me....he also had not finished his grief. Certainly he had fled like the other disciples from the time of the arrest and he might not have even seen the crucifixion. Only the women and John were present, perhaps, and Thomas would have sought support in gathering with the other disciples, but he did not believe their story. Where was he in the process of grief in the Kuebler-Ross model. Was he at the stage of denial (that if Jesus was dead, he could not rise again), was it anger (at the Romans and Jews who executed his Lord); was it the enduring sense of loss that Jesus was really gone from the world.....each of us who has felt the power of death in the loss of a loved one has a small sense of what Jesus disciples must have felt.

There had been an Easter, by the time the disciples had come together, but Thomas did not know of the rolling away of the stone, of the empty tomb, of the scene of the risen Jesus to the brave women who went to anoint him.

And at that moment, it seems, Thomas was still in despair, in denial...even anger, would you not have been in the same situation

I learned this week from Kristina Hine, a candidate in our Presbytery, who shared her sermon with me on this same text, which she prepared as part of her ordination examination, that perhaps Thomas was a cousin of Jesus and a brother of Matthew, hence the idea of the “twin” he was the twin brother of Matthew. Like James and John were brothers, and cousins...”they were family as well,” wrote Kristina. The evidence is that in Luke Thomas is mentioned together with Matthew, as were James and John. Simon and Andrew, Phillip and Barthalemew, as the James is mention alone and the two Judases the Zealot and Iscariot.

I have lost a cousin. His picture hangs in my study, along with my own (Gott sei dank!) still alive brothers. I have lost my mother and father, all my aunts and all my uncles....about whom I still believe. But the shock of each of their deaths still haunt me and my nights in dreams...for in my dreams

they are still alive. But unlike Thomas, I do not expect to see them resurrected, and certainly, I do not need to stick my hands into their sides, for I could acknowledge that they are dead, and yet I yearn as all who believe in a life beyond the grave to meet them again. The main event in the story before us today, is that we as Christians are to share with Thomas our unbelief which can be transformed even without seeing Christ and or needing to stick our fingers into the wounds of the nails in his hands (by the way this is the story that captures the sense of the “blood of Jesus being shed for us.”

Or into his side where the Roman sword had been thrust.

I think the story was told by the author of John to show that all Christians might have some doubt about the resurrection, as was hinted in both Matthew and Luke in their stories of the appearances of Jesus. Certainly Thomas wanted to believe what the others had told him. But he could hardly imagine it was true. In life many people tell us things we want to believe, and we want to tell others about our stories, our lives. We want the others to accept our stories, dreams, loves and connections. Sometimes they do, but often they may have some suspicions or “hang-ups” about what we are sharing. The church of Christ some difficulties today accepting all the stories, and dreams, loves and connections of some of its members, but if we

accept them in the light of the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, then we will accept them because they are bearing witness to that.

But the kernel of the idea in the story is summed up by the author as to the point of the book itself. Jesus did many signs, only 7 are mentioned in this gospel, and they were recorded “in order that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and through this faith you may possess eternal life by his name.” (Jn 20:31 NEB)

Could we ever ask any more than that...we listen and hold onto the faith that the evangelist was sharing...that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God...whom we affirm in our creed, and in so doing we are in possession of eternal life. Let's say that again....Jesus is the Christ.

I may note as well that in the following story (John 21:1-21, perhaps the text for next week, that Jesus came back in the boat with Peter, Nathaniel, James and John fishing again.....

Where another vision of the risen Christ would appear and invite the disciples (now apostles?) to “come and have breakfast!”