

Thomas Without the Adjective

This passage from John's gospel which takes up the story of Easter in the immediate aftermath of that shocking discovery is one of the richest and meaningful passages of scripture that we have on many levels. There are many things happening in this brief thirteen verse passage. The scene is the closed, locked room filled with the fearful disciples. It is especially meaningful, I think, in the context of our current experiences of feeling isolated, to consider their situation.

But that is just the opening. They have returned to a familiar place, but without their leader. Yet, suddenly he is among them and greeting them with the standard greeting of Shalom: "Peace be with you." And with his appearance, everything changes. They rejoice. Christ again says to them: "Peace be with you." But then adds instructions: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." In John's gospel, there is immediacy to this sending. There is not waiting fifty days for the arrival of the Holy Spirit with tongues of fire—this is Pentecost for Jesus breathes on them and says "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is a very quiet Pentecost, and it almost always gets overlooked by what is then discovered—only then are we told that for some undisclosed reason—one of the twelve—Thomas the Twin—is absent from the room at this particular time.

And up until this moment of very bad timing that is how Thomas has always been known within the scripture accounts—he has been designated as Thomas the Twin in fact in verse 24 of this very passage. It is only by the later generations of those who became followers of Jesus that this designation of doubting was applied to the disciple Thomas—so perhaps we need to examine why that adjective of doubting Thomas has stuck so closely to him. Is it because of his reactions within scripture or is it more closely related to our own? If we backtrack a little bit in John's gospel to just before the death of Lazarus, Jesus is sent a message by his sisters that he is very ill. Instead of going to him, he delays going until after Lazarus's death. He explains to the disciples that he is going to "wake" him. Now the disciples are already aware of plots to kill Jesus and they warn Jesus that going there is going to be dangerous. John 11: 16—Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

Of course, once we get to the events of Holy Week, Thomas did not remain any closer than did any of the others, but here again we have confirmation that among the disciples he was a firmly committed follower. The passage which concerns us now does not indicate how long Thomas was absent from the group, just that he was not there when Jesus made his appearance that Easter evening. The news he is given when he gets back is this: "We have seen the Lord." Now this is pretty much the same news that Mary has already given the group, earlier in the day. That news from her did not cause them to rejoice. It was only when they also saw the Lord that they rejoiced. So is it really that surprising that Thomas now responds as he did? He does not immediately rejoice but says, "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." We are so familiar with this

statement which earns him that nickname, and which has become the basis of many sayings based on the concept that seeing is believing and so forth. Yet when we look closer at what Thomas now does, what does his behavior tell us about him? Thomas who doubts what he has been told by the others remains there with them for a week; still in that same house in a locked room. This man who has previously gone out and about in the city. Why would he return to this place being locked in a room, this place of possible danger? Why is he staying so close to the others in that room? Is he waiting and hoping for something? For the something that does indeed happen a week later. If we look carefully at what happens we can notice that Thomas actually does not respond any differently than did the other disciples. When Jesus comes among them again, although the doors are still shut, and Thomas is there, what happens is very much the same. Jesus says: "Peace be with you." He invites Thomas to touch him, but Thomas is not recorded as doing anything but answering, "My Lord and my God!" For him, also, the sight of his risen Lord was all that he needed. Thomas only needed to see his Lord—just as the other disciples had needed to see him—hearing that Mary had seen and spoken to him did not alleviate their fear or cause them to rejoice. The exchange which follows is often taken as a rebuke, one made strictly between Jesus and Thomas, but I wonder if it is not really directed more to all of us who would follow so many years later. Jesus then says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This matter of faith is not easy. I think that we can all agree that we as people of the 21st century have some challenges with our faith—with faith in anything. In the midst of our skeptical world that demands proof for just about everything, that want to declare everything relative, faith is by definition something inward, subjective, mystical and mysterious. It is something impossible to get a firm grip on faith and put it up in a hard and fast, rigid, never changing objective form plainly seen by all. In the 21st century we tend to want verification, but that is the problem. Science and facts can be verified. Beliefs are not to be found in the same universe. Belief—faith—is something altogether different. And for us, that creates a modern day dilemma. Faith is not easy for us. It is impossible to really get a firm grip on faith. At the end of the day, how can we be certain about things like God and redemption, the afterlife and ultimate destiny? As the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard phrased it, for every proof there is some disproof. Reminds me of a law of physics that states for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Yet at the end of this passage John's account of the resurrection attempts to do just exactly that. In it he states "that the signs Jesus did are recorded here "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." Unfortunately, that's just restating our problem, for in the 21st century we are more doubting that doubting Thomas ever was. We are just not moved by the "signs" that moved people in the First century. Miraculous events simply don't command the same kind of faith in us as they did for people of ancient times. To a great extent, this problem of "verification" is built into our search for faith. If it's faith, we can't

prove it, can we? And if we can prove it, where's the need for faith? I guess that's why many of us find this passage from John's gospel so appealing. I think we tend to resonate with Thomas' doubts. As people of our time, we don't want a faith that consists of "wishful thinking" or "smoke and mirrors" as skeptics often claim it is. This problem gets a lot of attention when it comes to Easter and the resurrection. Even St. Paul recognized as he wrote to the Corinthians that "if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith is in vain." There is a lot riding on whether or not something actually happened on that first Easter Sunday. If Easter was merely a symbol or a vision of some kind of spiritual experience that had no correspondence in this world, then the victory we proclaim over death seems less than real, our redemption perhaps not as solid. Without Easter, what is there to distinguish the death of this one Jewish man from the countless other deaths at the hands of cruel oppressors before and since? It is important that our faith rest on more than wishful thinking, but when it comes to faith there just are enough "airtight" arguments that logic and intellect can present to give a final verdict. That's just not the way that faith works! At the end of the day, when we approach these matters solely with our intellect and our logic, it would seem that the doors to faith are permanently closed and locked shut like that upper room where the disciples hid. Yet Jesus entered that room. The passage doesn't say how. He just appeared in their midst—twice. So how do we find the faith to go out and live in the light of the hope that God is working in this world to bring grace and mercy and peace and justice and love and joy and life abundant to every life? Ironically, Easter gives us some help. In ways that we simply will never be able to sufficiently explain or concretely prove by logic or intellect, we continue to have the experience of the living Christ in our lives. The same Jesus who surprised those first disciples huddled behind locked doors out of fear, also surprises us behind the locked doors of our doubt. Faith is not easy. The truth is that it never has been easy. In some respects, we only find faith by having faith. It's very much like setting out on a journey without even knowing where you are going, like Abraham and Sarah. The answer seems to be that you set out with the baggage of your questions seeking the answers. It seems to me that genuine faith always has some questions but in the pursuit of the answer finds deeper faith, a closer relationship with perhaps not a final answer but a better understanding of the calling of discipleship. Faith is that willingness to seek to find the presence of the living Lord and experience the guidance that will be provided. You see, I think that Thomas remained in that room for a week even without any indication that Jesus would come back because he wanted to see Jesus. He wanted to believe. His was a doubt expecting to be satisfied. We need to accept that we may experience questions on our journey of faith; we need to accept that in this broken world there will be much that we will not understand. However we need to live with the expectation that the questions we have, the doubts that are raised can be answered if we live expecting to see and experience the presence of the Lord. In some respects, like Thomas we need to remain in

the room because the questions our doubts raise often lead us to an even deeper and closer relationship with our Lord. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.