

BE THOMAS' TWIN

Sermon, April 11, 2021

Texts: I John 1:1-4; John 20:19-31

*"Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that by believing you have life in His name."
John 20:30-31*

As noted, John is incredibly and intentionally selective in the compiling of his Gospel account. He is saying in so many words, "I have far more sources, far more memories of things that Jesus did, so many things about Him that I haven't used." To get an idea of just how selective he was, scholars of John's Gospel who've meticulously read through these pages point out that John covers only twenty or twenty one days in the course of Jesus' earthly lifetime. This is hardly a full biography; he's very selective. So note: **John's** is the only Gospel that tells us anything at all about the disciple Thomas. So you get the idea John wants us to take a good look at this particular disciple. When John records Thomas saying, "My Lord and my God," that is arguably THE climactic encounter of this whole book that is "... written that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" It is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus is called God without qualification of any kind. Which, by the way, is a remarkable confession for a monotheistic Jew ... to call another human being "my God." These are certainly not the words of a cynic. Last week, we talked about how Mary Magdalene gave the post-resurrection church's first sermon, this week; Thomas gives the post-resurrection church's first affirmation of faith clearly asserting and affirming Jesus' full deity.

Those of you who've been here for awhile know I've always admired the apostle Thomas. "Thomas, called Didymus," the Gospel text reads. You may remember Thomas is the Aramaic word for twin, and Didymus is the Greek word for twin.¹ So, a literal translation would be, "Twin, called Twin." Some historians say Thomas wasn't even a real name at that era, just a nick-name at the time which has now evolved today into an actual (and quite common) name. It would seem, then, that Thomas had a sibling. I find it interesting we don't know anything about Thomas' other twin. Was it a twin brother? A twin sister? An identical twin? We don't know. None of the Gospels tell us of a sibling. In early church history the Gnostic sect referred to Thomas as the Twin Brother of Jesus ... which would certainly change our nativity scenes to have two babies in the manger; but I digress. One early church tradition held that he was called "the Twin" because he had a remarkable physical resemblance to Jesus, so, the other disciples called him Thomas as sort of a nickname; they called him "the Twin." Again, we don't know.

Perhaps, just maybe, this mystery around the identity of the other twin is intentional. Maybe the Spirit-inspired author of John's gospel wanted us to think that, perhaps, the other twin could be any one of us. After all, if you read his words at face value, the way the very selective John portrays Thomas is actually flattering. He portrays Thomas as a disciple worthy of our emulation and our admiration. I think John is intimating all of us should strive to resemble Thomas, to be like Thomas, to BE Thomas' unnamed twin. A plain reading of John's words portray a Thomas who is a faithful disciple worthy of our imitation, not our derision.

Let's quickly look at John's three accounts of Thomas. One we just read; the other two take place earlier in chapters 11 and 14. In chapter 11, upon receiving the news of the death of His dear friend Lazarus, Jesus said to His disciples, "Let's go back to Judea." Now, Judea was not a safe place for Jesus and the disciples to go at that time. The disciples knew they all faced tremendous danger there; they were understandably reluctant to put their lives at risk. John tells us in verse 16, "Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'" Now some in church history have taken that to be something of a cynical, sardonic, pessimistic remark, "Oh well, we're doomed anyway, we may as well go there and die with him ... it's been nice while it lasted. Sigh." But no, it was not a cynical remark. It was Thomas boldly and resolutely saying, "Let's GO WITH HIM, no matter where He leads, no matter what the risk." I think Thomas realized that where Christ leads, light and life follow, and he for one wanted to be the kind of disciple who will go wherever Jesus led, come what may. He was determined not to let Jesus out of his sight, which is admirable ... too often, professing disciples decide not to "go with Jesus" when following Him might entail risk or danger or loss of security. Thomas wanted to go wherever Jesus lead, come what may. Doubting Thomas? I prefer Dogged Didymus ... or the Tenacious Twin. There was a tenacity about him that was determined to follow Jesus Christ no matter what. That is worthy of our imitation and our profound admiration.

The second account is in John 14. Many of you are familiar with John 14:6, where Jesus makes the claim, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me." He makes that memorable, definitive assertion in response to a question raised by Thomas. John 14:6 is preceded by, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God,

¹ The name *Thomas* (Greek: Θωμάς) is derived from the Aramaic or Classical Syriac: ܛܘܡܐ *Toma*, equivalently from Hebrew *Teom*, meaning "twin". The equivalent term for twin in Greek, which is also used in the New Testament, is Δίδυμος *Didymus*. From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle

believe also in me. In my father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and to receive you unto myself, that where I am you may be also. **You know the way to the place where I am going.**" And I can imagine Thomas raising his hand, "Uh, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" I can also imagine the other disciples sort of standing around nodding their heads like a bunch of typical men not big on getting detailed directions, "Yeah, we know the way, we'll see you when we get there, whatever you say, Jesus." But not Thomas! He does *not* understand. He insisted on clarity. He wanted to know and understand what Jesus was talking about, and he presses Jesus for an answer. (ed. note – the following was edited out due to time constraints; I include it here: Chapter 14 is a continuation of the same conversation in Chapter 13. In 13:33, Jesus says to the disciples, "Where I am going, you cannot come." Peter then asks, "Where are you going?" Jesus doesn't really give Peter a direct answer. He says, "Where I am going you can't follow now." And now, just a few verses later in 14:4 Jesus says, "You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas, who hates conversations like this, says in exasperation, "Lord, do we follow you or not? And how can we know the way, if we don't know where you are going?") Thomas refused to say he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe, and so he pressed Jesus for clarity. Jesus gives one of His most memorable teachings in response to Thomas' sincere question. In so many words, He said, "Thomas, I am the way. You may not fully understand this now, but you will. *I am the Way. I am also the Truth. I am also the Life.*"

Finally, today's Gospel reading. It was the night of that first Easter Sunday. The rest of the disciples were hiding behind a locked door, but no Thomas. We know from earlier in the chapter they had heard Jesus was alive, but they didn't know what to make of that. The text tells us they are huddled together behind this locked door "for fear of the Jews." Well, all the disciples are Jewish, so that means they are in fear of their own people. Yes, they feared their own people (we perhaps understand that now probably better than ever before: you might say they were practicing social distancing, huddled in a locked room, afraid of their own friends and family, afraid to go out). Suddenly, the risen Jesus appears in their midst (and allow me to make the observation that of course ... the risen Jesus is often present where two or three disciples are gathered together in His name, especially on Sunday!) Seeing Jesus in their midst, their doubts dissipate, they are overjoyed, delighted; they are energized, emboldened by Jesus' living presence, they are motivated by His word, and empowered by His spirit (and allow me to make the observation that of course, that's what often happens when the living Jesus visits His disciples gathered together in His name on Sunday!) Jesus appeared to the disciples in this closed room, showed them His hands and side, they were overjoyed to see Him, but as noted, "Thomas, called Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came." I can imagine the disciples saying, "That Thomas ... boy, *Did-he-miss* it this time!" Now, we don't know where Thomas was, any more than we know where approximately 60% of our church's members are who aren't here on a typical Sunday morning ... even when there isn't a pandemic! All we know is Thomas was absent. And he missed out; he missed something very special because he wasn't gathered with the other disciples that Sunday. Most likely he just wanted to be alone; often those in grief do want to be alone, and that is not a bad thing in and of itself. That's understandable. But trust me on this ... it is not good to stay alone too long. There's a sermon in itself here, but it is not good to keep on neglecting the fellowship of other disciples. Thomas missed "church" that Sunday, and as a result, his despondency only deepened, his doubts only grew and his despair only increased ... he missed the doubt-dispelling, despair-destroying, faith-exhilarating, negativity-negating blessing the other disciples received from Jesus' presence (and from each other) when they gathered together that Sunday.

When the other disciples told him, "Thomas, we saw Him! Right there with us last Sunday! We saw the Risen Lord!" Thomas replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it." Over the centuries some have seen Thomas' response as cynical and even obstinate, but I don't think so. I think Thomas refused to be *personally* satisfied with the Christ *his friends* experienced. Imagine Thomas saying, "I am not going to be satisfied with your second-hand reports! I haven't seen Him, and I want to see Him, and I need to see Him in such a way that I want to touch His hands and feet and side myself!" He was not satisfied to live on the "faith experience" of others. That's good! That's a healthy doubt and determination worthy of our emulation. Don't be satisfied with your parents' or grandparents' experience of Jesus Christ, don't be satisfied with your pastor's experience of Jesus Christ, your wife's, your husband's, your child's, your friends' or anyone else's experience of Jesus Christ ... experience the living Jesus Christ for yourself, and don't be satisfied until you do! And Thomas got his request granted. On this Sunday after Easter Thomas is now with the disciples, and this time encounters the living Lord for himself. Jesus came to him and showed His hands, His side, and said, "Stop doubting and believe." Which might be paraphrased, "Stop doubting and live!" or "Thomas, stop acting like I am dead and gone; and live accordingly!"

And Thomas responded by saying, "My Lord and my God."

Doubting Thomas? Again, I prefer Dogged Didymus or the Tenacious Twin. And I think John is telling us in no uncertain terms: BE THOMAS' TWIN. Like Thomas, seek clarity about Jesus' words; try to understand just what Jesus is saying to you. Like Thomas, with passionate intensity resolve to go where He leads you to go, to do what He leads us to do, come what may. And like Thomas, don't be satisfied with second hand information about Jesus, don't be satisfied living off of other's experiences and encounters with the living Lord. Encounter Him yourself, until you, too, find yourself saying, "My Lord, and my God."