

A healthy sense of skepticism can certainly be a good thing. I remember coming home from Kindergarten one day and telling my parents, "There's a girl in my class who's the strongest girl in the world. She can lift up a police car."

My parents asked, "How do you know?"

I answered, "She told me."

Apparently I was pretty gullible. I had to learn to be more discerning. You don't want to always believe every tall tale you hear. You shouldn't believe every e-mail you get from Nigeria promising you millions of dollars. You have to learn that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Skepticism can be a healthy thing.

So then, why are we so hard on Thomas Didymus?

'Thomas Didymus? Thomas the Twin? Oh, you must mean Doubting Thomas.'

With the exception of Judas, no other disciple stands in such desperate need of a good PR Firm, in need of competent spin doctors. Sure, Thomas had what we would regard as a pretty healthy sense of skepticism. He liked to look before he leaped, he wanted concrete evidence and verification. But we don't assign nicknames to the other disciples based on their character flaws. We don't refer to Simon bar Jonah as "Denying Peter." We don't call Zebedee's sons "Ambitious James and Pushy John." And yet, Thomas is known in the Church as Doubting Thomas.

If we remembered what he did elsewhere in the gospels, we might have a different nickname for Thomas.

When Jesus was getting ready to go to Jerusalem, even though it was highly dangerous, it was Thomas who said, "Let us go him, that we may die with him."¹ Perhaps courageous Thomas? Loyal Thomas?

¹ John 11:16

Or the night of the Last Supper, it was Thomas who asked Jesus about the way to the Father, to which Jesus famously replied, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."² Maybe, Seeking Thomas? Searching Thomas?

Let's look at our Gospel lesson for today from John 20 (bulletins). The story line is fairly simple. v19 We're told that it's late on Easter Day. A quick recap of the events of the morning: John and Peter had visited the grave, and we're told that John believed when he saw the linen wrappings. That was my sermon last week.

Afterwards, Mary Magdalene stood outside the tomb weeping. Apparently she wasn't as confident as John. But then Jesus appeared to her, and called her by name. And, she went and told the rest of the disciples the news that Jesus was risen.

Which brings us to v19. It's evening on Easter Day. The disciples are still hiding out behind locked doors. But locked doors don't stop the Resurrected Jesus. He appears in their midst and says, "Shalom aleichem." 'Peace be with you.'

But we're told, v24, that Thomas was not there with them. Later, the other disciples tell Thomas about Jesus appearing to them. v25 "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas doesn't buy it for a moment. 'You've seen him? Well unless I can see and put my finger in the nail marks of his wrists, and put my hand in spear wound in his side, I will not believe.'

And that's why we give Thomas the Twin the unfortunate nickname of "Doubting Thomas." He wanted proof. He wanted to see Jesus with his own eyes.

But just think for a moment. Imagine someone walked up to you three days after attending a friend's funeral and said, "Oh, by the way, your friend is alive." I think you'd be a bit skeptical. Besides, look at all the others in John chapter 20. Why does John believe? Because he saw the empty linens. Why does Mary believe? Because Jesus spoke to her. Why do the other disciples believe? Because Jesus appeared to them.

² John 14:5

In general, Thomas is not asking for anything that the other disciples didn't get to experience. He wants to see the evidence, same as them. The disciples tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." No, he doesn't believe. But last week we heard Mary tell the disciples the same thing, "I have seen the Lord." Do they believe? No. At least not until Jesus makes a personal appearance to them. v20 "He showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." Thomas wasn't there. But he simply wants to see what they saw.

In fact, to digress for a moment, I've always wondered where Thomas was that first Easter night.

The Gospel of John doesn't give us any answers. But I have a favorite hypothesis. There's no concrete evidence to support it. But I'm comfortable that it's congruent with the other data we have about Thomas. I can imagine that when Thomas heard the news that the tomb was empty, he left the locked room. I can picture him out looking for clues, looking for solid evidence of the resurrection. I can see a rather bold Thomas pounding the pavement of the streets of Jerusalem, while the other disciples are back home cowering. I can envision the questioning and skeptical Thomas poking around the empty tomb looking for confirmation of the resurrection. Of course, I could easily be wrong, but I can very easily see Thomas out taking risks while the others are content to play it safe.

But in any event, John doesn't supply any missing details as to where Thomas was. He simply jumps ahead to the next week.

v26 a week later, the Sunday after Easter, Jesus appears again. And this time Thomas is with them. And Jesus offers Thomas exactly what he asked for: v27 "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Actually, doubt is a poor translation. It literally says, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing." Jesus is not giving Thomas a hard time because of his skepticism. Instead, he is inviting him into a relationship of faith. "Do not be unbelieving, but believing." And Thomas enters that relationship fully. Thomas professes more faith than anyone else in the Gospel of John. v28 Thomas answers, "My Lord, and my God."

Perhaps he should be known as Believing Thomas, for out of all the people in the Gospels, Thomas makes the most complete statement of faith in Jesus Christ, "My Lord and My God!"

Thomas brings the Gospel of John full circle. We, the readers, know from the glorious beginning of the Gospel that Jesus was with God and was God. But Thomas is the first to proclaim this identity, the first to make this ultimate confession of faith: My Lord and my God. Peter is credited in the other Gospels with first recognizing that Jesus is the son of God, the anointed of God, the Christ of God. But Thomas goes one step further. Jesus is not only of God, Jesus is God. No longer doubting, Thomas Didymus is now Believing Thomas.

In the Gospel According to St. John, Jesus meets people where they are. Jesus brings people to belief in various kinds of ways. And that's Good News. Jesus is interested in meeting individual needs. For John, the evidence of the empty grave cloths in the empty tomb was enough. For a weeping Mary Magdalene, Jesus appeared in the garden and offered consolation. For a bunch of scared disciples hiding behind locked doors, Jesus appeared right in the midst of them and offered his peace. For a skeptical Thomas, Jesus invited him to put his fingers into his wounds. And next week, we'll see, for a Denying Peter who stands in desperate need of forgiveness, the Risen Jesus brings forgiveness.

Jesus Christ meets all of these varied needs of his followers in varied and individualized ways. He meets them where they are. But he also calls them to move beyond. Mary Magdalene tries to cling. She is told not to touch him. Instead, he sends her out with a message to proclaim. Thomas is skeptical. Unlike Mary, he is invited to touch. But then he is challenged to enter into a relationship of faith. Jesus meets these people in various different ways. And they believe.

Thomas Didymus, Thomas the Twin believes.

The Gospels never tell us who Thomas's Twin is. It's mysterious, and open ended. Perhaps, we're invited to see Thomas Didymus, Thomas the Twin as our Twin. Perhaps in a sense he is. Perhaps in a sense, all of us have a certain kinship and twin-ship with Thomas.

I suspect we've all experienced both doubt and faith. I suspect that we've all been able to pray with the father from Mark who said, "Lord I believe, help my unbelief." None of us were firsthand witnesses of the first Easter. None of us had the experience of being in the physical presence of the resurrected Christ.

And yet we have all experienced Christ in some way. We have all been drawn for one reason or another, into his body, into his fellowship, into his church. We are the ones Jesus was talking about when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe."

However, as Thomas's twins, and as 21st century Americans, there is a dangerous side to his personality that we need to approach with caution. Thomas had separated himself from the community. Thomas was off on his own. Thomas was a Lone Ranger, without even a Tonto by his side. Thomas forgot that we experience Jesus most completely in community. We are not saved alone. We do not come to know Jesus Christ alone. Even if a person only comes to know Jesus and accept him as their personal Lord and Savior after reading a Gideon Bible in a motel room, he doesn't come to Christ alone.

That Bible was placed there by a member of the Christian community. The books that that Bible contains were selected by the community. And the words those books contain were written by members of the community. Though our culture preaches the benefits of rugged individualism, we must never forget that we in the church are all tied together, that we are children of God, that we are members of the body of Christ.

((It is into that fellowship of faith that we'll be baptizing young Charlotte Voight in just a few minutes. There was a time that some of you may remember when baptisms would be done privately, with just the priest, family, and godparents. But a couple decades ago the Episcopal Church made the conscious decision to return to the older custom of baptizing new Christians publically, as part of the worship of the whole church family. It's a reminder that we grow best in our individual faith in the midst of a community of faith.))

Even when we are unable to pray, we are united through community to the prayers of others.

Even in times of pain and anguish, we are part of a community that celebrates.

Even in the midst of doubt, we are part of a Church that through the centuries has confessed, and still confesses, that Jesus is Lord and God.

Thomas didn't experience Jesus by himself. He experienced Jesus in the midst of community. And we pray with Thomas, and with that community, that "(We) who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in (our) lives what (we) profess by (our) faith,"³ and that we may doubt no longer, but believe.

In the name...

³ Collect of the Day, BCP p. 224