

Second Weekend of Easter (RCL/A): "Thomas the Believer"
1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31
April 15-16, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

There are beautiful violets blooming in the parsonage garden. They are a long-ago gift from Ruth & Bruce Beers. The first autumn I lived here there was no time for gardening, so the next spring the perennial garden against the garage was in frightful shape. I must have mentioned the daunting weeding job ahead of me to Ruth, who said, "No problem, I'll send over Bruce." He arrived with his Rototiller and made quick work of chopping those weeds and leaves into mulch and expertly cultivating the soil into a clean slate for my garden-to-be. Soon thereafter he arrived with a palette of violets from his & Ruth's garden on Morris Ave. in the woods of Wall, over by Camp Evans. There were traditional purple violets, but also white and blue ones, that have reseeded themselves and still bring joy, years after both Bruce & Ruth entered the Garden of Paradise.

Our Gospel this weekend is about Thomas, "one of the twelve," whose nickname in life was "the twin," but whose unfortunate nickname for posterity is Thomas the Doubter. 'Kinda like going down in history as Oscar the Overweight or Wilma the Worrier or Freddie the Fearful or Brenda the Betrayer. These are not qualities we want to be associated with, even short-term, no less down through the ages. Yet **doubt can cultivate the soil of our souls to receive holy seed able to bear the fruit of faith.**

So here's a question: **why** did Thomas more-than-doubt, let's say "downright disbelieve" what his entire group of friends said about seeing the risen Lord Jesus? After all, it's not like it was the word of just one fellow who was known to be kind of wacked out anyway.... It was **everyone** who had congregated behind locked doors that first Easter

night. We're not given a head count, but we assume the remaining 10 apostles were there (Judas was already dead, remember), as well as the female disciples who had traveled with Jesus from Galilee, including Mary Magdalene who had been the first to see the risen Lord and communicated that to the others. Thomas isn't quietly skeptical or dismissive about what they're saying, he's **emphatic** about his disbelief: "I **refuse** to believe unless I get to put my finger in the nail marks and my hand in the sword slice in His side!" (John 20:25)

And here's a related question: where **was** Thomas anyway, when all his "buds" were huddling together for mutual support? Why did he peel off alone? The rest of them were behind locked doors "for **fear**," says St. John, certainly for fear of being arrested like Jesus. Was Thomas **braver** than them? (After all, St. John says when word reached Jesus that Lazarus was deathly ill and Jesus insisted on going to him, over the protests of those who said, "You're nuts, they're going to kill you" [John 11:8], it's Thomas who said, "Let's go and die with him!" [John 11:16]) Or was Thomas a loner who preferred to grieve in solitude? Maybe the company of others irritated rather than comforted him; we all mourn in different ways.

So back to **why** Thomas didn't believe the news that could've/should've made him jump for joy? *****

Other than **resurrection** from the dead seeming **ridiculous** apart from God's sacred promises and amazing power – maybe Thomas wasn't ready for his hopes to be dashed again. He felt like when he'd put all his eggs in that basket once before, the basket had dropped, the eggs were smashed on the pavement and couldn't even be made into an omelet. He **hurt** and he was protecting his **heart**. We can probably identify with that: "once burnt, twice shy."

Would any of the **others** have believed if **they'd** been missing when the crucified and risen Lord popped in on the group? Had they believed **Mary Magdalene** when **she** told them the Lord had appeared to her? **If** they believed her, why were they still afraid and behind locked doors that night??

The bottom line is: we can't know **where** Thomas was that first night, and we can't be sure **why** he was elsewhere, but we sure **can** see that **his absence was more important than his presence ever could have been.** This story is so important that it's **always** the Gospel the weekend after Easter. No matter where we are in our 3 year cycle of readings, we always bump into Thomas again one week after the Resurrection of our Lord. Before the risen Lord appeared to him, Thomas was the Disbeliever. But when the Lord appeared, he became Thomas the Believer. I think it would be fairer to him if we referred to him in that way instead of Thomas the Doubter. Like if someone is in recovery from an addiction, we say they're in recovery. And if someone is in remission from cancer, we say they're in remission. The first part of the story becomes old news. We should stay current. We should give people credit for growing, maturing, healing, becoming. We should let the past be in the past, and live in the present, into the future.

Thomas the Believer makes the greatest profession of faith in the entire 4th Gospel, and he does it in 5 short words, not even a full sentence: "My Lord and my God!" He's really the only one to say that Jesus **is** the God of Hebrew Scripture: He's not just the Son of God, he **is** God. It's the other bookend to what we hear in the Prologue to this Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word **was** God." (John 1:1)

The risen Lord Jesus loves Thomas. He meets him where he's at: "Go ahead, poke your finger into these nail holes, reach inside My wounded side!" What follows isn't really

Jesus rebuking Thomas, it's more Jesus encouraging us: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" (John 20:29b)

Jesus loves **us**. He meets **us** where we're at, our doubts included. Some people think that doubts are **unfaith**, the **absence** or the **denial** of faith. But they're not. Doubts show that we're taking our faith seriously enough to ask questions of it, to confess our confusion, to wrestle with it like Jacob wrestled with the angel, to say, "The jury's still out on some things." It's the blessing of community: put us all together and there's enough faith to keep the boat afloat! When I have a hard time trusting (which is what faith ultimately is, **trust** in God's faithfulness), I borrow some of yours. When I'm weak, or sick and tired, in one way or another, I drop to the back of the vee like a migrating goose, and let those in front of me take the brunt of the wind and ease my way. When I'm spiritually exhausted, I ride, I glide, in someone else's slipstream. We all take turns....

Like Ruth & Bruce's violets that blossom still, even though their earthly remains are now in the soil, the faith of our loved ones who have gone ahead, the memory of the trust **they** had in God, the legacy of **their** faithfulness blesses us in our journeys. And so what we heard in the 1st letter of Peter (1:8-9) hopefully applies to us, too:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham