



SAINT MARK'S

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Easter 2B St. Mark's
April 23, 2017
Thomas
John 20:24-28*

What a privilege to be at St. Mark's on the Day School Sunday. I have fallen in love with each of these amazing children and feel it a privilege to be with them at chapel and share a story with them. So today in their honor, I would also like to tell a story. Every second Sunday in the Easter Season we hear about Thomas, affectionately called doubting Thomas. However, I would like to share a **different** story about Thomas given to me by Herbert O'Driscoll¹. Let's **walk** into this gospel and imagine **we** are **Thomas** to see if we might **hear another** story.

You are in a strange city. You are not a city person. Your world is the countryside, the lake far away to the **north**. You followed someone you loved and admired/ and worshipped him, but now that person is dead. His death has been very public and political, and you know **nothing** about politics.

You have no family or friends here in the **south**. You are on the run and have **no** place to go. **Soon**, people will again be out in the streets as the Sabbath ends. You will become more exposed because it is obvious from your speech and clothes that you are a **stranger** from the north. As you wander aimlessly, you realize that the person who is the reason for your predicament is lying dead in a borrowed grave less than a mile away, and you do not dare go near there. You have already risked your life for him. When Jesus decides to come south to the home of Mary and Martha after Lazarus died, you are the one who blurted out, “Let us **also** go, that we may die with him.”

Wait, there is **one** place that may be safe. You remember the upper room in the house where you shared a meal the night before last? It is the one place known to all of you, the one place where you are most likely to find the others. Yet, you cannot make yourself go there.

You realize you **don't want their** company right now. You have come to see **every one** of them in their **utter humanity**. The ox-like dullness of Peter, impetuous, loud-mouthed, unreliable, the crass self-interest of James and John, the sheep-like passivity of the rest, their inability to grasp anything of the vision Jesus offered and lastly there is that utter treachery of Judas Iscariot. Judas is **your** name as well, but people have nicknamed you **The Twin** to

distinguish you from him. Disgusting, even your name is disgusting! **Everything** about you and your group is disgusting. You cannot help but remember the cause you gave yourself totally to which transformed your life, giving it purpose and meaning. You had such great hope for it all. In giving yourself to it, you now find yourself, and all of that utterly destroyed. You do not want to hear echoes of familiar voices or reminders of past days.

You are now near the house where you suspect they have gathered to wait in hiding for the remainder of this awful Sabbath to be over. You could just walk those last steps, go up the outer stairs, knock at the door, and whisper, “It’s Thomas.” But instead you turn and risk yourself again to the city streets.

We fast forward to a **week** later. You can no longer live with this loneliness and fear, so you surrender and decide to risk joining the other disciples and most probably your own death. The first one you meet at the door is your friend John. He immediately blurts out, “Thomas, Jesus is alive and appeared to us on the evening of the first day of the week when you were not there”! They all try to persuade you of what has happened in your absence. You feel only more contempt for their naïve and magical thinking. But with **no** place else to go, you stay with them, **against** your better judgment.

You are hungry, tired, depressed, and want to go back home to Galilee. Even the **women** cannot console you.

Then just as the light of dawn breaks, **Jesus appears again**. He walks **right** through the doors and walls of the room! He comes directly to **you** and says, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” You stretch out your hand as if to touch, and your **broken heart is healed**.

Frederick Buechner believes there is no other story in the Bible easier to **imagine** ourselves into than John’s story about Thomas. John is writing near the end of the first century to people like us who have never seen Jesus in the flesh. A child who is five on the first Easter, the age of some of St. Mark’s day school children, is close to **seventy** when John writes his gospel.²

Herbert O’Driscoll’s midrash¹ suggests that Thomas, possibly an **introvert**, chose not to join the other disciples after Good Friday because he wanted to be alone to deal with the depth of his loss. Far from being a doubter, the description forever attached to his name, Thomas is the consummate disciple, the one who gives himself utterly to Jesus.

Those of us who have given ourselves deeply and generously to a cause can often withdraw from participation when something changes and our passion diminishes. We decide we no longer want to be associated with the relationships that issued from that passion that once gave meaning to much of our time and energy. We find ourselves blaming everything and everyone connected to the cause or church or organization or relationship where we have been harmed.

If you read church history or spend much time in a church, unfortunately you will know this so often happens in the life of the church and the world. A vestry, choir, or school board member, Sunday school teacher, outreach leader, (even clergy) ends years of service and is **never** seen again. They have been through very difficult times and issues, and have performed with magnificent competence, but something happens to break the bond with congregational or community life. There may still have a personal spiritual relationship with God, but now there is an aversion to the life of the worshipping community.

Sometimes this may result simply from burnout. We are tired of trying to resolve endless struggles between differing opinions and factions. Sometimes the cause is deeper. Perhaps we have a sense of disappointment with the church, a feeling not so much that we must leave it as if somehow **the church** has **left us**. Perhaps we

expect the church to have **less** unpleasantness than we find in other worlds we move in, our home or our professional life. Perhaps we expect people to behave **differently**, be more forgiving, more able to love each other. Little by little we come to see the **church** as the problem, or at least a **large** part of the problem. And so there comes a day when we discover that life is perfectly livable without something we once treasured and even loved.

It is sad that this link to a church community is often severed precisely at a stage of life when we most need a worshipping community where we can find friendship that is freely offered, support when we need it, and a purpose in living.

The gospels tell us that Thomas **desperately** wants to believe in Jesus. When given the chance, he blurts out his steadfast faithfulness as he kneels before the One who comes to **all of us** through our locked doors/ as Thomas looks up and says, “My Lord and my God.”

For Thomas and the rest of us, this return to our faith community is the **pathway** to encounter the Risen Christ. We must also **always remember** that Jesus cares so desperately about people **like us**, like **Thomas**, who get burned out or lose faith in our community that Jesus does a total **rerun** of his **first** Easter

encounter with the disciples just for those of us like Thomas who leave for one reason or another, but in our **desperation** finally return. Jesus is calling **specifically** to **us** as he **speaks over** Thomas' shoulder/ looking **directly** at **us** and says, "Blessed are those who have **not** seen and yet have come to believe."

This is the first of **many** Easter gospel stories about where we find the resurrected Jesus in **community**. Thomas' story marks our opening to a **new stage of faith and church life**. Up until Thomas' story, our New Testament faith came in the human face of Jesus' physical appearance. **Today** the risen Christ meets us in the hearing of his word **in community**.

As it was for Thomas, may it also be for us, in **this faith community**.

1 Herbert O'Driscoll, "The Encounter," Four Days in Spring, pp. 96-100.

2Barbara Brown Taylor, "Believing in the Word," Home By Another Way, pp. 114.