

Second Easter
St. Gregory the Great
April 11, 2021

Thomas, Our Twin

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! On this first Sunday after the celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus, you might expect a story about a grand and ongoing party, finding the disciples celebrating the triumph of the one crucified over those who killed him, of the powerless over the powerful, of good over evil--all things to celebrate and proclaim. Instead, in our story for today from John's gospel, *always* told on the Sunday after Easter, we find most of the disciples of Jesus hiding behind closed doors on what we would call Easter night, in a quandary of fear and uncertainty. They did not yet *get* the whole Resurrection thing, which up until then amounted to the claims of a couple of hysterical women running around in the dark. No party on the agenda, they were most likely distracted, somewhat confused, surely grieving, probably scared, and not a little bit guilty, and I would bet they were going over and over all that had happened in the previous few days since their Passover meal together with Jesus, trying to make sense of it all. How could that terrible thing have happened? What could they have done differently? Had they been abandoned? Had they been responsible? What should they do now? Their gathering in that locked room was pretty understandable, when you think about how people tend to drop everything to come together after a tragedy that affects them, sharing parts of the story, looking for answers as to how, when and why the bad thing happened, and what--if anything--they could have done differently, and what they should do next. Not to mention-- for the disciples--would the authorities that arrested Jesus come for them next?

Things had been going so well after that glorious procession into Jerusalem just a week ago. Then, what was supposed to be a Passover holiday weekend turned into a nightmare, with their beloved Jesus betrayed, brutally tortured and killed and buried. They must have sought consolation in being together, holding *together* the grief and the tension and the doubt and the bewilderment, trying to sort all the conflicting emotions that filled their hearts.

Then, *there he was*, right there in the middle of them. They heard his voice, saw his wounds, felt his Spirit, his very *breath* on them. "Peace be with you," he said. *Peace*. They *saw* him, they *felt* that peace, and they *knew* that it *was* him. What they believed about how he got there is not clear, but John wanted his readers to understand that they *believed* that it was Jesus, come back to them.

No one knows where Thomas was—why he wasn't there. Maybe he was mourning alone. Maybe he was taking care of some practical detail that always needs taking care of when someone dies. Maybe he was visiting the family of Jesus, paying his respects. What *is* told about Thomas is that the wounds of the crucifixion were planted in his memory. He knew that his Lord had died and he was distraught. And he was outside of his group of companions that

had locked the doors of their gathering place to keep themselves safe. So when they told Thomas what had happened in his absence, he did not believe them.

Thomas, labeled the *doubter*, could also be called the *blurter*—one who would say out loud what others would surely have been thinking, but afraid to say. Thomas had not been an unengaged disciple. In the Gospel of John, Chapter 11, the disciples had tried to keep Jesus from going to Lazarus in Bethany, because his life had been threatened by some in Judea. When Jesus told them Lazarus was already dead and that they needed to go in order that their belief in him be increased, it was Thomas who said to the disciples, *Let us also go, that we may die with him*. In John Chapter 14, after Jesus told the disciples that his Father’s house had many dwelling places, and that he was going to prepare a place for them, it was Thomas who said, *Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?* This was the perfect set up for Jesus to answer, *I am the way, and the truth, and the life*.

That the other disciples were able to take in the truth of a risen Jesus Christ before Thomas had a lot to do with their having been together in fellowship—in community—when Jesus appeared to them. They might have been hiding, but they were hiding out *together*. When that peace came over them, each of them could measure his disbelief with the others’ reactions, relying on others for the virtual pinch to confirm that what was happening was real. Alone, it might have been harder to distinguish a resurrected person from a ghost. *Together* they could witness their collective responses, and tell each other they weren’t crazy.

Left out of the experience and alone, Thomas could not have been expected to take it all in second-hand. Not there to experience the depth of collective emotion, the power of the peace offered by the Risen Lord, without any sensory input of his own, without that *peace*, how could he believe another unbelievable episode in an already unbelievable story? Who could blame him for demanding some evidence that *who* the disciples described to him *really was* Jesus? After all, the others hadn’t really believed Mary Magdalene, had they?

So Jesus came back later when Thomas was there—Thomas who was sticking it out with his crazy friends, even though he thought they had gone off the deep end. Jesus came back to give Thomas the same opportunity as the other disciples to *see* with his own eyes, to *know* with his own heart. Jesus could have gone to see Thomas alone, to catch him up on things, but he chose to bring Thomas into the resurrection fold with his brothers present, with the support of the community. You can almost hear the excitement in the room. “See, Thomas, we told you so, it really is him!” You can almost see their faces exploding with the joy of sharing a penultimate moment of their long and often puzzling journey with Jesus and one other. The offer of Jesus to have Thomas touch him was genuine, but Thomas did not need to take him up on that offer, because he *felt* the peace, and he *saw*, and he *knew*. The invitation to Thomas was an invitation back into the fold, into a share in the rejoicing that all had seemed lost, and was now found. His Lord was dead, and now he was alive!

Jesus knew how difficult the disciples' mission was going to be, that it was a big ask to send them out to the whole world with the good news of the love of God in the risen Christ. Jesus knew how hard it would be to tell an unbelievable story to people who would not have the benefit of having known Jesus and seen him in the flesh—before or after his rising. Jesus knew it would take that *peace* he brought to allow the miracle and meaning of his resurrection to sink in. Jesus knew the disciples would need each other—for strength and for the reality check—and considered every single one of them important: the fearful and the bold, the doubting and the trusting, the quick-witted and the slow, the jealous and the generous. Together they would find the way to hold on to that peace, to believe, and to grow God's kingdom.

As for Thomas, he not only believed that Jesus stood in front of him, making the impossible possible; he also learned to believe and trust the shared joy that must have been in that room. He believed in the gift Jesus had given him, in the fulfillment of a promise, and in the calling and direction of his life. And this belief was strengthened and sustained because it was shared with his friends. Thomas was eventually called to spread the gospel in lands east of Jerusalem and is given credit for making converts in Persia and as far as India where he died a martyr's death. There is still a group in India today known as Thomas Christians.

So this is all a pretty good story about the importance of community for believers in Jesus Christ, an idea that would have been easier to sell a bit over a year ago when gathering for worship lent us all the sense of community that affirmed our faith and strengthened our belief. A bit more challenging today, when I preach to a camera and to a congregation no less real, yet gathered in memory and imagination. Before the pandemic, there was not much in our collective consciousness that would equate our separation from one another as a loving act of preservation of life itself, and yet that is what it has been--a deep sacrifice of self separating *from* one another *for* one another. There is no little irony that we have sacrificed community to save its members. And even though we see that proverbial light at the end of a long darkness, we are not bathing in it yet. Our grief at the losses of this past year--including the cost of isolation--still weigh heavily upon us, and we are bereft for a place to lay our burdens down and be comforted in the breaking of the bread together. I think this year may be the first time I have had real empathy for Thomas--out there on his own--even for just a week--carrying the burden of his doubt, his grief, and his estrangement from his friends and his Lord.

The hope for us in this story of Thomas in our own time is that even as we wait for the all-clear to come together in faith and worship in those familiar ways that affirm our belief and our longing for *knowing* the resurrected Lord, the love of God continues to grow inside each and all of us, forever drawing us back in God's good time to that room of fellow believers. We are not abandoned in our isolation, just as we were not abandoned at the foot of the cross.

There has been some speculation through the ages as to the identity of Thomas' "twin." I like the idea (not mine) that it might be *us*—that *we* might be the Twin of Thomas. I find this comforting because it would allow us space to struggle, question, even doubt our faith at the best and the worst of times. It would allow us room to blurt out those questions that no one else

wants to ask, such as *God, where are you anyway?* It would make room for realists, skeptics, and believers in science—those who need the whole truth—to have faith. It would make room for the fearful—those who long to lock the doors—to have faith. It would allow us a faith which can, in turns, be challenging, empowering, crippling, sustaining, exhausting and persevering. As Twins of Thomas, we could question and still be ready to see and know and remember that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God, that we are *resurrection* people who have walked out of that grave with Jesus, and are marked as Christ's own forever in our baptism, regardless of where we are physically, or how we are able to stay connected to one another from day to day, week to week, month to month. And we know that Jesus will *always* come back for us, even when it seems like a very long time, even if we have missed a main event. He will come to us when we are alone in the dark like Mary Magdalene, *and* he will draw us back into our communities like Thomas, where we will cry *My Lord and my God!* silently or aloud, in prayer and in song, in God's own time, so that our joy may be complete. Until that day comes, may the story of our Twin, Thomas, give us hope, and may the deep peace of Christ be upon us all. Christ is Risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Amen.