

JOHN 20 19-31

Jesus Appears to His Disciples

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”

²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Jesus Appears to Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the

doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

The Purpose of John’s Gospel

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

A Reflection for the Season of Easter (John 20: 19-31)

I suspect there is no scriptural character more misunderstood than the Apostle Thomas.

“Doubting Thomas” we’ve called him down through the ages, because Thomas lived by the saying “seeing is believing” and because he looked for certain tangible signs to shore up his belief.

I’d like to challenge this characterization of Thomas!

As you consider the story of Thomas after the Lord’s resurrection, have you ever realized that Thomas never doubts the Risen Lord? Thomas doubts the word and the witness of the others. When the Jesus turns up a week later, Thomas is filled with faith. “My Lord and my God,” he confesses.

In this story from John, it is not Christ that Thomas disbelieves, but Christ’s disciples gathered there in the Upper Room. Thomas simply did not find what his friends said credible.

Let’s step back...What do we know about Thomas? Actually, precious little except that Thomas was chosen by Jesus to be numbered among the twelve.

The first mention of Thomas is in the 11th chapter of John. Lazarus has died. Jesus has been summoned and though he delays his journey back into Judean territory, it’s clear to his disciples that Jesus intends to go to Bethany, to the tomb where Lazarus has been buried. Some of the disciples think travel is really dangerous under the circumstances: the Jewish leaders were at that very moment looking for an opportunity to put Jesus to death. It is Thomas who realizes Jesus has made up his mind to go to his friends. It is Thomas who says to the others: “Let us go to die with him!” Fearless Thomas, we could call him; loyal Thomas; loving Thomas. Thomas is willing to stand by Jesus, even to the point of death. He urges the others to do the same.

A few chapters later John records Jesus’ prayer at the last supper. His language is one of riddles. It is almost possible to see Thomas, brows furrowed, trying to follow the what Jesus is saying, and finally blurting out: “We don’t know where you are going. How can we possibly know the way!” Thomas wasn’t alone surely. The others must have been just as confused, but perhaps they were afraid to show their ignorance. Minutes earlier Peter had protested his loyalty to Jesus unto death -- and Peter had been cut down to size. Who would dare speak up? Yet Thomas is not silent. He didn’t understand and he wanted to! He can’t follow Jesus

unless he knows where and how. It's as simple as that. Straightforward Thomas, we could call him, or simple Thomas, or how about refreshingly direct and realistic Thomas.

These two stories show us a background for the story of the appearance of the Risen Jesus. The Lord arrives when Thomas is out. The disciples are gathered in fear behind locked doors. Jesus appears and fills them with joy. He gives them a mission and gives them his own Spirit to continue his work. Jesus makes his presence and power known to his closest friends and offers them the spirit-gift. At least that's what the Scriptures tell us.

But Thomas isn't present. He'd just stepped out briefly. Maybe he was doing a grocery run. Perhaps none of the others would put a toe out the door – but not so, Thomas. He ventures forth. He is either fearless, or just plain foolhardy – or maybe both, which may be what we also need to be – but that's to get ahead of ourselves.

Thomas returns and they tell him they have seen the Lord – but for Thomas, something doesn't ring true. If they have seen the Lord why are they still locked up tight in that room? If they are filled with such joy, why couldn't he read it on their faces? If they have been empowered by the Spirit of God to “complete Christ's work on earth” what are they

waiting for? For Thomas to return? Surely not, or they would have been so breathless and eager that he would have seen the transformation in their eyes.

So Thomas says to them, in so many words, “I don't find you believable.” Thomas – simple, loyal, loving, straightforward, down to earth, direct – who didn't understand but wanted to, who longed to follow Jesus but who needed to know the way - Thomas didn't doubt the Lord; he doubted the word of his friends! Thomas found it highly unlikely that the Lord was Risen because he was surrounded by a group of witnesses whom he simply did not find credible.

There is an ancient saying in the Eastern Church: If you want to know if Jesus is really Risen, look around you at the faces at Easter.

Thomas could not read the presence of the Risen One on the faces of his friends...

What would he read on our faces?

What do we read on one another's faces?

We need to look like a credible community, a community that has seen the Lord and been transformed.