

Easter 2 (“Low Sunday”) sermon 2021

Jn 20:19-end

Thomas: doubting and courageous

The Gospel reading today is a very familiar story, and for that very reason it’s easy to skate over it because we’ve heard it all before. Thomas, doubting Thomas, has missed out on the appearance of Jesus in the locked room and is not willing to believe what he has not seen. And Jesus on his next appearance convinces Thomas, and then points beyond Thomas to those - like you and me - who have come to believe in him even though we have never seen him.

And I wonder, as you look again at this story, what you make of it. How does Thomas figure in your mind? Do *you* see him as “doubting Thomas”? Do you see a weak believer who can only be convinced by the evidence of his eyes? Perhaps he’s just jealous that he was not in the room when Jesus appeared and blessed his friends?

Of course we have come across Thomas before in this Gospel - at Chapter 11 when we read of the death of Lazarus, in the context of growing conflict around Jesus and his ministry. From verse 14 the story unfolds:

Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

If this were the only reference to Thomas in the Bible, we might have called him “courageous Thomas” and not “doubting Thomas” at all. As it is, we know both these things about him. And it’s interesting that in both these references, we are told that Thomas was a twin.

Do you know the statue in Hope Street, by Stephen Broadbent, of Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock? It was commissioned by the Liverpool Echo and paid for by the people of the region. They stand together, a bit like twins really, facing one another. But my friend and colleague Archbishop Malcolm McMahon, the present Archbishop of Liverpool, has pointed to the third circle on the pavement between them, a circle where anyone passing by may stand, and connect with the values and virtues of the gospel as these men lived them out. There is room in their friendship for us. So also perhaps there is room in our lives for Thomas, the twin, in his courage and in his doubting. Perhaps we can stand beside him and learn from him.

The Bible is very concerned to make sure that we know that Thomas was a twin. In fact the word Thomas itself means “twin”, and would have stood alone. But on both the occasions I’ve mentioned the Gospel writer emphasises the fact - as if the words said “Twin, who was called the twin”.

It is never spelled out why this is important to the writer of the Gospel, and it’s never spelled out who Thomas’ twin was. Some have speculated that he was the twin of Jesus himself, but I’m not convinced by that. To me it matters that Thomas was a twin, and that I don’t know who his twin was, because it makes me wonder whether I could be his twin.

Nancy Rockwell says this:

Thomas is a Greek name, and it means twin, though his twin, if he had one, never appears, and some suggest we are, each of us, his twin.

For each of us has our nagging doubts that sometimes prompt us to get up and investigate a situation that needs our attention, and that sometimes hold us back. If Thomas' doubts are the most persistent, then he is our twin because our doubts persist, and at times are insistent, and they have the ability to lead us to new discoveries about ourselves and in our relationship with all that is holy.

My doubts are not so much about whether Easter happened, though I do question that at times, but about whether it is important, whether it has anything to do with me. After all, it is from my own suffering that I long to rise.

Easter insists on an end to our victimization, and opens an endless Day of Peace, which we must begin to proclaim. The disciples move through degrees of despair and doubt in each other's company in a long, varied conversation, in which all the things they think and feel are transformed from Demons into Angels. Easter is new life, rising. Not about escaping with our life, but walking in the power of God's love, even into death. And that's what it has to do with each of us. (Nancy Rockwell)

I am moved and inspired by these words in this age of the Coronavirus. Under the pressure of lockdown and uncertainty, bereavement and anxiety, I ask God for the grace to be courageous, and as part of the courage, not to be afraid to doubt, so that in both these ways I can be Thomas' twin.

The American writer Anne Lamott has said:

"The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns. Faith also means reaching deeply within, for the sense one was born with, the sense, for example, to go for a walk."

Easter is the season of light and hope beyond death and darkness. And I pray for you, and for all of us who are Christians, that we can be unafraid, and trusting, and wise in uncertain times. May God bless you with that love that casts out all fear, the love of the risen Jesus whom we cannot see but in whom we believe. The poet Sydney Carter wrote that very well-known hymn "Lord of the dance". In another poem he describes our life as being lived, as it were, on a boat and not on solid ground, and he describes what it is to live in faith and not in certainty.

And I pray his poem for you, in this Easter season and in all you have faced in the past year and will face in the coming months; that you may come to know doubt as a friend and a dancing partner, and that you, too, may dance courageously with Thomas, your twin.

Here then is Carter's poem, "Doubt is"

*Doubt is what you
drown in or walk upon*

*the solid deck
is never really solid*

*singing a carol round
the Christmas tree
you can forget that you
are floating but*

*the ship is not rock-bottomed
all the while
you walk upon the water
I will love*

*This dark and
downward pulling
angel doubt
that I could never learn*

to dance without.

May God bless you and yours, and fill you with hope of the life that never ends. Amen

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Sydney Carter (1915–), 'Doubt Is'