

## Sermon: Courageous, Believing, Pessimistic, Tough Thomas

Year A, Second Sunday of Easter

[Acts 2:14a,22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31](#)

Offered April 23, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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A Gospel is a collection of encounters with Jesus of Nazareth meant to create new believers and sustain current believers.<sup>1</sup> We heard that first with the Samaritan Woman at the Well. We got to see her created as a new believer. She wasn't an obvious choice. She was a highly unlikely, take-a-real-long-shot choice of someone who would come to be a follower of Jesus. So was the Man Born Blind. The argument is that when we see such improbable followers of Jesus call him "Messiah" (John 4:29) and say "Lord, I believe" (John 9:38), then we current believers are sustained. In today's reading from John, we get to see a current believer sustained. We get to see a true believer, Thomas, sustained in his belief, not on a day when the crowds shout "Hosanna" as you trail behind your teacher walking on the palm fronds and cloaks that the crowds have laid down for him. We get to see Thomas, a tough, no nonsense guy, on a tough day at the end of a tough week. And he says, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28) on a day when most of us would have said, "I don't know. I have my doubts."

Jesus had been in Jerusalem, before things got too tense there. So he headed out to Galilee, which is when he had to pass through Samaria, that route that no normal rabbi would take. It's on that journey that he meets the woman at the well. That journey will continue on from Galilee in the north heading back towards Jerusalem in Judea. On the swing back towards Judea, Jesus meets the Man Born Blind. Towards the end of that journey, Jesus gets word that his friend, Lazarus, is dying. When Jesus tells his disciples that they need to go to Judea to care for Lazarus, they reply *the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?* (John 11:8). Jesus explains why he has to go. And it is Thomas who says to his fellow disciples *Let us also go, that we may die with him.* (John 11:16) There is no doubt here. There is just courage, conviction and love.

Thomas is a true believer. He loves Jesus so deeply that he is willing to go to Jerusalem and die with Jesus when all the other disciples are holding back.<sup>2</sup> Thomas is also a pessimist; he's expecting the worst, he's expecting the Cross.<sup>3</sup> Like many pessimists that we know and love, just because he is expecting the worst, doesn't mean he isn't devastated by it when it comes. Like all Jesus' disciples, he's frightened of what will come next, of the pain and degradation that will come when he too is seized by the authorities and hung on a cross to die.

For some unknown reason, he's not with the other disciples on Easter evening when Jesus appears to them. Think about hearing about Jesus' appearance from the other disciples. They're all excited, over the moon, that their teacher is alive. That Mary Magdalene hadn't gotten the story wrong in her fear and her grief when she had come earlier in the day to say Jesus was risen, that the tomb was empty for a good reason, a great reason, not because the authorities were frightened that people would venerate Jesus as a prophet and worship at his grave. Think about how Thomas felt in that moment. "Was I not worth coming back for?" "Was I not good enough to be worth seeing?" "Did our relationship, our personal relationship between you and me, Jesus,

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 61.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*. Vol. 2. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975: 275.

<sup>3</sup> Barclay, 275.

mean so little to you? It was something I was ready to die for, simply because you wanted to go somewhere dangerous.” That first Easter evening had to be a tough day for him. Add to that that he was a bit of a pessimist, and think what the news of Jesus’ appearance also meant. Seriously, when the dead won’t even stay dead, what can you count on in this world?<sup>4</sup> Because that’s part of being a pessimist, staying grounded in the bitter realities of this world.

Thomas is a courageous, believing, pessimistic, tough guy. He hears that Jesus had appeared, had bid the other disciples peace and given them a new mission. Now it’s not just Mary Magdalene who has seen Jesus, but it’s his brothers and sisters who have followed Jesus all over Palestine. They are telling him something he wants to hear. Jesus is Risen! He is Risen, Indeed! But Thomas is not someone to be rushed into believing what he wants to believe.<sup>5</sup> Could you have held out? I’m not sure I could have resisted being swept along with my now ecstatic crowd of friends, planning missions around Jerusalem or even further afield. I doubt I could have held the line and said, “Not until I have confirmation am I sure I’m included in this.” That takes an enormous amount of self-knowledge and self-control. Because I would so have wanted to believe it.

But Thomas is tough. He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe.<sup>6</sup> He doesn’t still his doubts by pretending that they don’t exist.<sup>7</sup> He knows what he needs. He needs a personal, particular relationship with Jesus. He wants what the other disciples got. Not because he’s jealous or needy. Of all of them, he knows how hard a challenge it is to be a disciple of Jesus. He wants what it takes to be a disciple of Jesus. That’s what they got.

It was evening when Jesus appeared to the other disciples. Remember this is the Gospel of John. The symphony of all those themes we saw in the Healing of the Man Born Blind is still playing. It’s evening, so the disciples are in darkness, not yet believing or understanding the events of the day.<sup>8</sup> The Light of the World appears to them and they believe. John’s recurring theme of light and darkness.

The disciples are behind a closed door. The word “door” here is the same word that was translated “gate” in Jesus’ discourse, or explanation, of the Healing of the Man Born Blind. Remember, the Good Shepherd was also the gate, both keeping the sheep safe and leading them to abundant life.<sup>9</sup> John builds one image on another.

Jesus breathes on the disciples and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). Technically, Jesus breathes “into” the disciples and that *breathing into* echoes God breathing into the clay that becomes humanity in Genesis.<sup>10</sup> John constantly points back to Creation in both Genesis and in the Prologue to John’s own Gospel. Because to understand Jesus means you understand the importance of Jesus’ origin and identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Anna Carter Florence, “Second Sunday of Advent,” in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 58.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur John Gossip, “The Gospel According to St. John: Exposition,” vol. 8 in *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952), 799.

<sup>6</sup> Barclay, 276.

<sup>7</sup> Barclay, 276.

<sup>8</sup> Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 244.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, 244.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, 245.

Unlike the other three gospels, in the Gospel of John, Jesus' disciples are not sent out into the world until now. Because they need the Holy Spirit breathed into them to be successful.<sup>11</sup> They are sent out into the world to build a community where forgiveness of sins is firmly lodged.<sup>12</sup> Sin in the Gospel of John, is the lack of a relationship with God. The first community to hear the Gospel of John, the one for which it was originally written, was one that had been exiled from their synagogues. They had been sent away from their original communities because they had believed that Jesus was the Messiah. So to forgive those who did not believe was to forgive those who had sent John's community away. Jesus is asking his disciples to forgive those who will ultimately end up sending them away for their beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

All that is what Thomas wants, Thomas needs, in order to be a disciple of Jesus. He needs the light and the door to abundant life and in-breathing of the Holy Spirit. Because if he is going to forgive the sin of failing to have a relationship with God and condemn those behaviors which get in the way of having that relationship, he needs all that. He needs to see Jesus' hands and sides and know that it is Jesus who is calling him to be a disciple once again, this time from the other side of the grave.

And there is Jesus. Just for Thomas. There is Jesus, assuring Thomas that the personal, particular relationship that exists between Jesus and Thomas is important enough to make a special trip for. The Word took on flesh and dwelt among us. God wanted a personal, particular relationship with each one of us. God wanted us to know how important the personal, particular relationship was, so God became a particular person. When Jesus appears to the disciples after the Resurrection, his body appears, ready to be touched. Just as Jesus revealed both his humanity and divinity before the Resurrection, Jesus is still showing both his full humanity and full divinity afterwards. This is what Thomas needed, what Thomas knew he needed. And Jesus was, and is, in the business of meeting people where they are.<sup>14</sup>

It's not exactly clear what happens when Jesus meets Thomas where he is. It appears to be intentionally ambiguous.<sup>15</sup> It doesn't say that Thomas touched Jesus. It doesn't say that he doesn't. And that makes sense. Because we are all such particular individuals with personal relationships with Jesus. What will work for Mary Magdalene won't work for Peter and James and John. What works for all the other disciples won't work for Thomas. Jesus will meet all of us where we are, because Jesus' relationship with all of us is personal and particular. Seeing Jesus isn't the only way that Jesus meets us where we are. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* (John 20:29) And blessed are those who have seen and have come to believe. Like Mary Magdalene and the other disciples and Thomas.

Thomas is a courageous, believing, pessimistic, tough guy. And when he was sure, he went the whole way.<sup>16</sup> Even though the description of the other disciples meeting Jesus again is so similar to the experience Thomas had, even though the accounts of the two events are almost identical,

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, 246.

<sup>12</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *John*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1988), 225.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, 247.

<sup>14</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, "Second Sunday of Easter, Pastoral Perspective, John 20:19-31" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 396.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, 249.

<sup>16</sup> Barclay, 277.

there is one striking difference. When Thomas meets Jesus again, Thomas answers him with a deeper commitment than any other disciple, *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:28). May we all be courageous and tough enough to ask Jesus for what we need to be disciples. And when we get it, may we all be able to commit wholeheartedly to pursuing the mission that Jesus gives us by answering *My Lord and My God*. Amen.