

The Gospel According to Thomas

Second Sunday of Easter

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Text: John 20:19-31

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – but have you heard of the Gospel of Thomas? There actually is such a thing, and many other ‘gospels’ too. One of the interesting things to explore when you study the early church, is to get a sense of the broad scope of writings that were collected during the initial centuries of the Christian community – some of which would be designated as a ‘gospel’. ‘Gospel’ as a word simply means ‘good news’, but as a designation of a kind of literature a ‘gospel’ is a writing that tells about the life and teaching of Jesus. Through the centuries the church distilled those stories of the life of Jesus into the gospels we have in our Bible – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. That was a process that the church has always believed was guided by the Holy Spirit – but it was also a human process that took lots of time and discernment - about 400 years in fact before things were settled - and there was a whole range of gospels along the way that eventually didn’t make the grade. It’s an interesting list to peruse: the gospels of Thomas, Philip, Mary and Nicodemus; the gospels of the Hebrews, Nazaraeans, and Ebionites; infancy gospels about the childhood of Jesus – just to name a few. Some of these gospels are more mainstream, and some actually quite quite bizarre; some have many connections to the 4 ‘orthodox’ gospels, while some are clearly written to get across a certain rival perspective or theology.

Now I’m telling you this – which I hope you think is kind of interesting – even though in fact this sermon isn’t going to draw at all on the contents of the Gospel of Thomas (although I do have a copy if you’d like to take a look at it!). What I really mean to get at, is just to take a step back to remind ourselves that the stories we receive in the gospels, and this story today about Thomas, are marked with the fingerprints of the church – they are passed on to us as stories that the community

of faith discerned as important to hear. In fact right there at the end of today's gospel reading it says: 'now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which were not written in this book' – so we receive stories that have made the cut! - this story about Thomas was discerned over time by the faith community as important for us to hear.

And in fact in our time, this particular story is actually one that is heard every year in our 3-year lectionary cycle – this is always the gospel lesson for the Sunday after Easter. And yet as I looked back, I realized I have never preached a sermon about Thomas – so I guess it's time after 25 years – I've preached on other parts of this story, but not about Thomas - about 'doubting Thomas', right? That is the familiar designation Thomas is given from his story – and I'm sure you've heard that characterization about Thomas addressed before, and probably challenged. Perhaps that's why I've shied away from this story – it just seems very clear to me that to summarize this story as being about 'doubting Thomas' is not at all a helpful shorthand to use.

It's an interesting propensity we humans have, the tendency to define a person, even a lifetime, by a single event. There are notorious actions that a person can never escape – 'he will NEVER live that down'; and there are heroic moments that can elevate someone in the opposite way – 'I'll never forget what you've done for me'. But if you look at John's gospel, this moment for Thomas is clearly not meant as a single defining event. In fact it is only in the gospel of John that we hear about Thomas several times (in the other gospels Thomas is just part of the list of disciples) – back in John 11, as threats start to be made at Jesus and other followers are wavering, Thomas says bravely; 'let us go with him to die with him' – perhaps he should be called 'Courageous Thomas'. Then in John 14 when Jesus talks about the promise of eternal fulfillment, Thomas asks: 'how can we follow you if you do not show us the way?' – Thomas is sincere in his wanting to follow Jesus – perhaps he should be called 'Earnest Thomas'. But really what we hear about Thomas simply serves to establish him as a credible disciple when we hear this story – this isn't doubting Thomas, this is faithful Thomas who is trying to figure out what is going on – how to respond to this fantastical resurrection news about Jesus that he has heard. And he is clearly not alone in this –

you notice that in this story, AFTER the resurrection, we're still told that the disciples are gathered in fear, locked into a room together – Thomas was not the only one uncertain about how to respond to this resurrection reality.

And so perhaps part of the problem of the designation 'doubting Thomas' is that it places the focus on Thomas – because one of the things lost in focusing on doubting Thomas, is that this story is told mainly to reveal more of who Jesus is. What the faith community did then, and has done since, is to gather and experience together who Jesus is – we come together in community to have revealed to us more fully who the risen Christ is.

So, as this story unfolds and we see the interaction between Jesus and Thomas, what does this story tell us about who Jesus is? Well, I think we can see a tension in who and how Jesus is – not a tension as in stressful, but tension in the presence of two different sorts of things that are communicated, a both/and held in contrast and balance. On the one hand, there is this 'pastoral' vibe, I'll call it, to how Jesus is. It starts, really, as Jesus comes and first greets all again with "Peace be with you" – he does not say, 'Peace to all of you, except for doubting Thomas over there' – 'Peace', wholeness, shalom, is how Jesus sets the tone for this gathered community. And then as Jesus seeks out and speaks to Thomas, I think it is hard to find any sense of shaming or confronting from Jesus: instead there is a recognition of the doubt, of the need for assurance – there is an intentionality of connecting Thomas again to his Risen Lord - the pastoral understanding is there.

And at the same time there is an urgency and challenge that Jesus joins to this pastoral peace. Jesus is insistent that the doubt not remain – 'do not doubt but believe' – Jesus is urgent about the challenge of carrying forward this good news, this gospel, to those who will not be able to see and touch in the same way. We see that Thomas responds powerfully to this challenge: 'my Lord and my God' – and it's clear that Jesus sends these disciples to foster such belief in others.

And perhaps a recognition of that same tension within us is how a focus on Thomas, a gospel according to Thomas, can be particularly instructive to us. If I can be honest with myself and with you about my faith, it is clear to me that I at times need some pastoral understanding from Jesus. There are for me times of doubt and uncertainty, times needed of reassurance and renewal in my faith, times of disconnection from this good news embodied in the Risen Christ. And in an odd sort of way, I think my faith would shrivel if there was no place for doubt, or if there was only shame associated with that doubt. But I know too that I need from Christ the words of urgency and challenge – that I need to have doubt that also receives truth; that I need to be challenged from a complacency that can be closed off from the need for hope and renewal around me, the need in this world for the ways of life to be shared. I would expect that same tension/balance could resonate in you – and not just for each of us individually, but together that tension/balance is formative for us as a community. If this is a place where we expect people to come with no doubts, with a faith fully formed and no need for questions or growth, then this will be a most inhospitable place. But I also think that of that's all it was here – only doubt, only hand-wringing, no convictions...well that would be a pretty miserable place too. So it is with the hospitality of doubt, that we also seek to live out the challenge of faith, the urgency of sharing good news – we live out the faith of 'my Lord and my God' to be a life-giving blessing to others.

So, just one other tangent about the Gospel according to Thomas – as I was looking into those early gospels, I was also thinking about how it has become a common modern idiom to term something as 'the Gospel according to...whatever' – which can be a way of framing a particular perspective on faith and Christianity, but sometimes too meant as a direct contrast. And you can find the Gospel from A to Z, literally – from the Gospel According to America to the Gospel according to Zen – and everything in-between...the Gospel according to: Charlie Brown, Disney, Dr. Seuss, ESPN, Facebook, Generation X, Harry Potter, Harvard Business School, Les Mis, Oprah, the Simpsons, Starbucks, JR Tolkien, AND – I was very pleased to find: the gospel according to U2 – our youth can be expecting to hear about that one from me! So, that's interesting - different takes from our culture on what 'Gospel', good news, faith looks like. But I

was thinking that what we continue to do as a community of faith is the same now as it was then – we gather to hear the story of the Gospel according to Jesus: which is the living presence of our savior – good news. And this Risen Lord both seeks us out in our fear and doubt, and challenges us to faith; he understands our weakness and urgently calls us to use our gifts.

And then as we go from here, there will be told the gospel according to you – and that being the case, Thomas is a pretty good role model for us: courageous, earnest, questioning, following, doubting, believing - faithful. The gospel of John says these stories are given so that you may believe in Jesus and have life in his name. In our doubts and our faith, our questions and courage, may such life be renewed in us and shared through us, sustained by the presence of the Risen Lord – “Peace be with you”. Thanks be to God. AMEN.