

"Thomas' Bad Rap"  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

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With the passing of the last member of a generation in a family, or of a graduating class, or of a military unit that served together, the last living witnesses to events and stories are gone. A few years ago, it was noted the last World War I veteran had died, though some over 100 years old might have childhood memories. Some survivors of the Holocaust of World War II are still alive to tell their stories, but the time is coming when these witnesses to horror will all have passed.

This is the situation for the early church at the end of the first century. Biblical scholars date the Gospel of John between 90 and 100 AD. Some sixty years after Jesus' death, it is likely most of those who followed Jesus had died; even one who might have a childhood memory of someone named Jesus teaching in their village would be in their seventies when John wrote his Gospel, far past the average age of persons in the first century.

This helps us know the Gospel's audience, particularly when Jesus tells the disciples, "Blessed are those who believe without seeing." Within those words is a message for the church at the end of the first century, a church that was dealing with having no live witnesses of Jesus. Yet, even twenty centuries later, we realize Jesus' words are for us as well. "Blessed are those who believe without seeing."

Our reading in John 20 is in three scenes. The first is Easter night when the risen Jesus appears to the disciples in the house where they have gathered. Thomas is not there. The second scene is sometime after Jesus has departed, with Thomas reacting to being told of Jesus' appearance. The third scene is a week later, when Jesus appears again; this time, Thomas is there. John 20:19-31:

Scene 1: *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among the disciples and said, "Peace be with you."<sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you."<sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.*

Scene 2: <sup>25</sup> *...the other disciples told Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

Scene 3: <sup>26</sup>A week later Jesus' disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.<sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Martin Luther – 95 theses. Betsy Ross – American flag. John Wilkes Booth – assassin. Thomas Edison – light bulb. Rosa Parks – bus. Some people are remembered for a single event or invention. In the Bible, we can add Noah – ark; Moses – Charlton Heston, or the Ten Commandments; Deborah – judge; and of course, Thomas – doubter.

When the single remembrance of a person is positive, we may say, "But there was more to Rosa Parks than just the single day she refused to move to the back of a bus." Yet, when the remembrance is negative, it is hard to shake. So it is with doubting Thomas. These days he could pay for a service like Reputation Defender to improve his internet image, though with twenty centuries to clean up, perhaps no one would tackle it. This morning, I want to try, because I think Thomas has gotten a bad rap.

Many years ago, there was a television show called, "To Tell the Truth?," on which three people each tried to convince a celebrity panel he or she was the person only one of them really was. After the panel had made their guesses, the game show host would ask, "Will the real Doubting Thomas please stand up."

I think Thomas could have fooled the panel. We may forget that, earlier in John's Gospel, Thomas courageously declared he would die with Jesus. (11:16) We may forget his probing question, "How can we know the way?" (14:5) to which Jesus responded, "I am the way." I think Thomas could have left the panel wondering if he was the doubter, or a courageous disciple calling others to die with Jesus, or a theologically probing disciple who wants to know what it means for Jesus to be the way? Will the real Thomas please stand up?

For me, Thomas is a wonderful reminder each disciple of Jesus is different – then or now. Christ's followers neither come to faith the same way, nor do we live our faith the same way. Few of us have not had doubts along the path of our faith journey; times when we wondered if there really is a God, and if so, what is the nature of this God who is supposed to be overseeing this world with love? Some evidence would be helpful, or a sign, just as those in Jesus' time had witnessed, just as Thomas desired.

Now, for those with doubts, there may be an answer provided in the coming weeks. I noticed and watched the online previews for "The Story of God," with Morgan Freeman on the National Geographic Channel. I did find it interesting when I went to the website, I read, "The Story of God – Coming Soon."! My goodness, and I was under the impression God's story began millennia ago. In any case, it is a relief to know "The Story of God" finally begins tonight, though a part of me thinks it might take longer than 5 one hour programs to tell the story.

Back to our own doubting. I find doubt more accepted these days, even among the faithful, though we may still hear an underlying voice telling us, "Thou shall not doubt," or at least, "Thou shall not doubt out loud." If so, we may feel a tinge of guilt if we doubt, if we have questions, if we wonder if God has abandoned us. My suggestion for those with such questions is to open the Psalms, and read the psalmists' struggles to understand God in relation to the ups and downs of everyday life and living.

Doubt can also arise when we compare our faith experiences with others, particularly those who share with us what is called a "born again experience." Yet, Thomas is evidence that some come to faith through years of nurture within the church and others in a dramatic faith experience. Some need signs and others none. At times we find our faith faltering and at other times growing.

Jesus did not condemn Thomas, nor make him feel guilty for his doubt. Jesus invited him to touch him, ending with, "Do not doubt, but believe." We often forget Thomas' response. He didn't frisk Jesus' body to be sure it was him instead, Thomas immediately voiced a statement of faith, "My Lord and my God!" By not condemning the doubt, Jesus elicited a response of faith.

In reality, Thomas' response was similar to that of the other disciples on the first night Jesus entered the room, when the gospel writer tells us they "rejoiced when they saw the Lord." So, in a very real sense they are all on equal footing after Thomas' statement of faith, and so Jesus' final words, are not just for Thomas, but for all of them.

*"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

This is where we remember John was writing his gospel for readers who would never have seen Jesus. So, Jesus words look past Thomas and the other disciples gathered in that room, ahead to generations to come who would not have seen him. As one writer summarizes, Jesus' words are of "hope and promise, not judgment and reprimand...a pledge and promise to future generations that they, too, will experience the grace of God in Jesus." [O'Day, Gail, *Interpreter's Bible Luke-John*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 852.]

In the years immediately following his death, it would be natural for there to be privilege claimed by those who had actually seen Jesus. There is nothing privileged in the way we come to faith – either through continual nurturing within the church, a dramatic faith experience, or an uneven path of belief and doubt, and doubt and belief. There are no charter members of the Christian faith; and, as such, no charter member privileges in any congregation. We are one in Christ.

But there is privilege – the privilege we each have to be sent into the world, of being commissioned by Jesus with the Gospel. When Jesus first came to the disciples in the locked room, he said, "peace be with you." And after their joy in recognizing him, he repeated his greeting of peace, and added, "As God has sent me, so I send you." But there's more. Jesus didn't say, "Just go do it, I'll catch you later."

Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." We will mark Luke's Pentecost on May 15, but in John's Gospel, Easter and Pentecost are wrapped up in one. Not only are the disciples commissioned, they are empowered. The word "breathed" is the same one used when God breathed life into dust to create humanity (Gen. 2:7), and when God breathed new life into the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:9).

Our lesson in Acts, which follows Luke's account of the sending of the Spirit, shows a committed community of disciples who, in spite of two arrests and floggings, keep telling the Good News of Jesus Christ. The accusation against them was, "You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching." They are living evidence of those into whom the Spirit had been breathed.

We are no more and no less a part of this new creation of Christ than Thomas, or the other disciples in that room, or even those who risked arrest in the streets of Jerusalem. Beyond that generation which knew the sight, the sound and the touch of Jesus, what continues to bind us to them, is the breath he gave those in that room. It is the breath that strengthens us to both wrestle with doubt, and risk declaring good news of hope and peace in the Jerusalems of our day.