

Second Sunday of Easter – April 15, 2007
Ascension Episcopal Church, Hinton, WV
John 20:19-31 – Doubting Thomas

The Rev. Kent Higgins

This morning I'd like to continue our discussion of how the Bible speaks to us. For those who missed the initial discussion – or simply have forgotten it – on Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday I talked about a means of interpretation which involves letting the words of Scripture convey a message that may not be the obvious or literal meaning.

Today's Gospel reading is one of those stories that I think everyone knows, by which I mean, who among us has not heard of "doubting Thomas"? This is not to say that we really know what the Bible says in this story – some of us do and others are a little vague about the details. There are others that fall into this category, including the story of the prodigal son; Moses coming down from the mountain with the ten commandments (but most of us cannot name all of them, much less put them in order); and there are others.

For most people, the doubting Thomas story portrays an obstinate fellow who, although he has been one of the disciples of Jesus for a long while, lacks the faith to believe that the others have actually seen the risen Lord. This is not a case of Thomas being from Missouri – the so-called "show me" state – it's far more harsh than that. Faced with the obviously enthusiastic, even ecstatic apostles who excitedly tell Thomas that Jesus has actually been with them, Thomas replies with that famous line, "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."¹

And so we read on in the Gospel and learn that Jesus, without being told what Thomas has said, re-appears in the closed room and offers Thomas exactly the proofs he had demanded. We probably hear Thomas being somewhat embarrassed by his lack of faith when he declares "My Lord and my God!"²

¹ John 20:25

² John 20:28

Is that pretty much what you hear in this story? It certainly was for me, at least for most of my life. And then one day, I heard this story in a way I had never heard it before, and it changed my perception of Thomas, probably forever.

Let me be clear about one thing: I am not trying to convince you that this other reading that I'm about to describe is the "right" reading. I think I would find it very difficult to say with any certainty that there is a "right" reading of Scripture for us. Now perhaps with respect to what the Bible was saying to its original audience, where we sometimes have a fairly full exposition of a story and can see how the people responded to it, perhaps there and with the benefit of lots of good reference books, I would offer an opinion about the "right" reading of a passage.

But if you were to ask me during coffee hour today to say what a particular passage means to us today, I'd have to give it some real thought and prayer, and the answer I would give you would not be definitive – far from it. At best, I would say, as I am saying now, "at this time and in this place, when I heard this portion of the word of God, this is the message I received."

But that's the point, you see. That is how the Bible continues to speak to us today.

So... . What's this alternative reading?

Do you remember how Thomas is introduced? John says, "...Thomas (who was called the Twin)".³ The King James Version says "Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus." According to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, in Aramaic *tē'omâ* (Hebrew, *tē'om*) means "twin," but there is not much indication that this word was used as a proper name in the Semitic world. The Greek word for "twin," *didymos*, is a well-attested name and may be the name by which Thomas was known in Greek-speaking Christian circles."⁴

What is the principal thing about twins? They are always being mistaken for one another. So, if Thomas was a twin, surely he had experienced someone saying "I saw you down at the

³ John 20:24

⁴Freedman, David Noel: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York : Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S. 6:528

market yesterday,” to which Thomas would have said, “No, you probably saw my brother. I was out of town yesterday.”

In other words, Thomas was accustomed to people making mistaken identifications of himself, and he naturally assumed the eleven had done the same thing. Whoever it was they had seen, it wasn't necessarily Jesus. In this light – and again remember I'm not trying to convince you that this is the “right” reading – in this light Thomas is simply responding to the information he has been given based on his life experience. And that is the way we respond to this story, based on our life experience.

Notice Thomas doesn't deny the possibility that it was Jesus,. All he's really saying is that if the person seen by the eleven really was Jesus, then Thomas will be able to prove it by specific tests. But it's perfectly natural for him to think they may have made a mistake and actually seen someone who just looked like Jesus. That is, after all, what has been happening to him all his life.

What is really remarkable is that when Jesus reappears, Thomas doesn't do the tests he originally said he needed to do. He doesn't put his hand into Jesus' wounds. He hears him speak, looks at him, and says – in the only instance in the entire New Testament where the identification of Jesus is unequivocal – “My Lord and My God!”⁵

Thomas alone recognizes both that this person standing before him is Jesus, his Lord, and Jesus, his God. It is therefore not a rebuke when Jesus says to Thomas “Have you believed because you have seen me?”⁶

Let me read it to you from the King James Version with a slight additional to make the point I have come to hear in this passage.

The twenty-ninth verse of the twentieth chapter of Saint John: “Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me” (and I add here “Jesus your Lord”), “thou hast believed” (and I add here “believed that you have seen God.”) Jesus goes on, “blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed” (and I add “believed that they have seen God.”)

⁵ John 20:28

⁶ John 20:29

Is it unfair to read John's Gospel this way? You decide for yourself. I don't think so, but again, I'm not trying to convince you to understand it as I now do.

What I'm trying to do is to say that Scripture speaks to each of us, and it can speak in different ways to different people at different or even the same times. That's not to say that Scripture is flexible and can mean anything you or I want it to mean, but it is to say that when God wants to speak to us, he calls us to read his Word – and let his Word dwell in our hearts until we really hear what he is trying to say to us.

I may return to this passage later and hear something entirely new from it. You may never agree that this alternative reading makes any sense at all. And that's just fine. What is not fine is to fail to read and think about and pray about the Scripture that God has given us. It is a lively and continuing source of revelation and inspiration. Use it. It is far too precious to waste.