

Low Sunday

John 20: 24-31
04 11 2010

Low Sunday after Easter
Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Last week we celebrated the glorious news of **Easter Sunday** morning. Churches around the world reverberated with the ancient words that are constantly new: “*Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!*” Congregations enjoyed standing room only as sanctuaries overflowed. Churches experienced their annual, high attendance day on Easter morn.

The liturgical calendar calls the week AFTER Easter “**Low Sunday**.” The origin of the title is unclear. Historians believe the name stood in contrast to the high festival of Easter. Following the celebration of the Resurrection, churches returned to the “low” or ordinary rhythm and routine of worship.

Local church pastors have a different explanation. Low attendance puts the “low” in Low Sunday! If Easter marks the high water mark for worship, then the week AFTER Easter is low tide. The same pews that were packed to capacity only seven days before now have plenty of room to stretch out for a short snooze.

On Easter Sunday, someone suggested that I act like a professor addressing a freshman class and say, “Look to your right and to your left. Two of the three of you will not be here next week!” I decided NOT to take the advice—although it WAS tempting!

However, the Sunday after we *continue* to celebrate the **Season of Easter**. For forty days, the risen Lord appeared to his disciples. The reports vary in the details. John’s Gospel reports that Jesus first appeared to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb on Easter morning. Later that evening he visited the disciples in the Upper Room.

Yet there was one disciple not present: **Thomas**—better known as “***Doubting Thomas***.” Thomas declared that he would not believe unless he saw and felt the nail prints and the spear wound. The Gospel lesson today shows the consequences of missing or attending church at Easter . . . and the Sunday after Easter! Today we are exploring Thomas’ life; and along the way we will see the importance of Low Sunday.

I. Four Pictures of Thomas

Little is known about most of the **Twelve Apostles**. The gospel writers focused their attention upon Jesus the Christ. Only a few of the disciples emerge as distinct individuals. The inner circle of Peter, James, and John is best known. Others make cameo appearances. Most of the Twelve, however, are known only as names on a list.

The main image we have of **Thomas** comes from John’s Gospel. Although today’s lesson is the best known story, Thomas is actually featured four times in the fourth Gospel. These four pictures of the disciple develop an image quite different from our traditional understanding of “*Doubting Thomas*.”

<h4>A. Thomas: the Apostle</h4>

To begin with, there is Thomas the apostle. The first picture John takes of Thomas is actually a group shot. Thomas appears with the other eleven as one of the **Twelve Disciples** of Jesus. All four gospels note his name. He is never at the top or the bottom of the list; instead, his name is always found somewhere in the middle. The placement of his name suggests that the Gospel writers did not consider him to be the greatest or the least of the apostles. His face blurs together with the other lesser known disciples.

Yet Thomas spent three years with Jesus during his public ministry. They traveled the length and width of Israel. He witnessed Christ's healings, exorcisms, and miracles. He heard Jesus preach and teach. He saw Lazarus emerge from the grave; and he joyfully marched with the others in the triumphant, Palm Sunday parade. From the beginning to the end, Thomas experienced every moment of Jesus' ministry.

B. Thomas: the Courageous Pessimist

Then there is Thomas the Courageous Pessimist. This second snapshot of Thomas is found in John 11. Jesus had crossed the Jordan River into the wilderness and was teaching on the far side. Then news came that their good friend, **Lazarus**, was deathly ill. His sisters, Mary and Martha, urgently begged the Lord to return. Yet Jesus delayed his departure for two days. Finally, he said to his followers: *"Let us go back to Judea."*

The apostles were not at all thrilled about Jesus' travel plans. Lazarus' hometown of Bethany was only a stone's throw away from Jerusalem's gates. During their last visit to the capital city, the Jewish leaders had attempted to stone Jesus to death—TWICE! No doubt they were even now warming up their arms for the third attempt. A return to Jerusalem appeared to mean certain death for Jesus; AND there would probably be enough rocks left over for his twelve closest followers!

However, Jesus was determined to return, and he invited the disciples to follow in his footsteps. There was a dead silence as the Twelve shuffled their feet as they intently studied the ground. Finally, one man stepped forward. Thomas—yes, Thomas—said, *"Let us also go that we may die with him."* The other eleven followed his lead.

A case could be made that Thomas was pessimistic and fatalistic about what the future would hold—but remember, he was right! The resurrection of Lazarus would be the final straw for the Jewish leaders. Afterwards, they began to actively plot Jesus' death. The first steps back to Bethany would lead straight to the cross.

Convinced he would die, Thomas nevertheless led the disciples to follow in Jesus' footsteps. A tough streak of courageous loyalty ran deep through the disciple's heart.

C. Thomas: Honest Questioner

Thomas was also an honest questioner. This third picture of Thomas appears in John 14. During the **Last Supper**, Jesus and his friends shared a meal together in the Upper Room. The next hours would bring betrayal, desertion, denial, trial, suffering, crucifixion, and burial. In their final time together, Jesus said to his disciples:

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will

come again and will take you to myself, that were I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” (John 14: 1-4)

Have you ever sat in a classroom with the teacher talking—and you had absolutely NO idea what she was taking about? And when asked if there were any questions, all the other students around you were nodding in understanding—when they didn’t have a clue, either?

Jesus was sharing critical information with the disciples that they would desperately need in the coming hours. The Christ was about to be crucified, and his followers would be scattered like sheep without a shepherd. He was trying to prepare them for what the night would bring. Yet Jesus’ friends didn’t understand a single word he was saying.

The easy option would have been to fake an understanding that they did not possess. You can hear Simon Peter saying, “Yes, yes, Jesus, good point. James, would you pass the bread?”

However, there was one person present who would not play that game. If he did not understand, then he would not pretend that he did. Thomas was willing to lay aside his pride and confess his confusion. He said to Jesus, “*Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?*”

Recognizing ignorance is the first step to learning. You cannot teach someone who knows it all. The only dumb questions are those unasked.

Because of Thomas’ honest question, we have one of the best known and loved verses of the New Testament. Jesus responded, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.*”

D. Thomas: Doubting Disciple

Finally, there was Thomas the doubting disciple. This is the fourth and final photo of Thomas in John 20. It is the photograph we know the best and pass around the most.

Thomas was not present with the other disciples on **Easter evening**. No one knows why. Perhaps he preferred to grieve in private or was hidden somewhere in fear. So Thomas missed Jesus’ first resurrection appearance to the other disciples in the Upper Room. When the others told him that Christ was risen, he reacted with belligerent skepticism. Thomas was a down-to-earth, matter-of-fact kind of man. Jesus was dead—and dead men do not live again. He had responded to the call to discipleship, followed his Lord into danger, and asked his questions of ignorance; and now he would live with Jesus’ death. Hysterical, second-hand reports of a resurrection would not convince him.

Thomas told the others: “*Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it!*”

. . . and seven days passed. The disciples waited an entire week for Jesus to appear again. As one day followed the next, whatever faint hope Thomas had hidden in his heart was brutally crushed. The fourth picture of Thomas reveals the doubting disciple who refused to believe in the resurrection.

II. Doubt and Faith

So here are the four pictures we have of Thomas in our family album:

- ❖ the faithful apostle
- ❖ the honest questioner
- ❖ the courageous pessimist
- ❖ the doubting disciple

It is a confusing portrait. Thomas is a complex character who is a study in contrasts. He holds in tension the seeming contradictions of faith and doubt, hope and despair, answers and questions, discipleship and disbelief.

Perhaps one key to understanding Thomas is in the adjective traditionally attached to his name: “*Doubting Thomas*.” What part does doubt play in the Christian faith?

√ **Doubt** asks . . . probes . . . challenges . . . even disbelieves. It dares to ask the tough but honest questions about our faith. Doubt is normally considered to be the opposite of faith; but perhaps Thomas shows us that doubt can be the companion of faith.

Children learn by asking questions. A preschooler’s constant questions can weary and perplex a parent. I recall some of my children’s questions that I’m still trying to answer, like: “*Why does Santa Claus come down the chimney but the Easter Bunny doesn’t? Is the Tooth Fairy a boy or a girl? When an angel takes someone to heaven, who drives the car?*”

Boys and girls also ask questions about their faith. I always LOVE it when a parent comes to me with child in hand and says, “Preacher, my child asked me a question this week about God, and I told them to ask YOU!” Questions like: “*Who were God’s parents? What do you say to God if the Lord sneezes? Who does God thank for is food?*” Try answering one of these to a three-year old!

These “cute” questions mature into more serious concerns. “*Why are some people hungry? Why didn’t God answer my prayer the way I wanted? Why did my pet get run over? Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?*”

At some point, adults quit asking those questions—at least out loud. Yet we still wonder. However, somewhere along the way most adults learn that you shouldn’t ask such questions.

Yet any good teacher knows this simple lesson: when you stop asking questions, you quit getting answers. If we do not doubt, then how can we believe? Questions about our faith and God can lead us into a deeper and richer faith.

Doubt can serve as the “*ants in the pants of faith*.” Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote: “*There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.*” Faith is not always the opposite of faith; sometimes, doubt can serve as a stepping stone to belief.

In Grady Nutt’s book, *The Gospel According to Norton*, he wrote about Thomas: “*Doubt was for him the deep companion of faith—it could bring you to faith in a more nearly mature way . . . he felt that doubt was the way to seek more factual information before making a commitment to belief.*”

There is a difference between doubt and cynicism. The cynics of our world doubt everything and believe nothing. They fall in love with the act of doubting itself. Their questions do not lead them to accept the answers. They exist to argue and discussion. Such people do not understand that questions and doubts are only justified by answers and faith.

Conclusion

Thomas doubted—but his doubt prepared his heart for faith. An entire week passed after Easter. Once again the disciples were gathered in the Upper Room. THIS time Thomas was with them. He might not have believed their stories about the Resurrection, but he wasn't going to take any chances.

Thought the doors were locked, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. He greeted them with the words, "*Peace be with you.*" Then he said to Thomas: "*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe!*"

Thomas dropped to his knees and said, "*My Lord and my God.*" This is the first time in the New Testament that anyone called Jesus "God."

Then Jesus said to him: "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

Two thousand years later we are the recipients of Christ's words. Blessed are those who have not seen but believe—who question yet also find answers—who seek, ask, and knock so that they may find, be answered, and have the door opened.

I suppose it's a good thing that Thomas decided to attend church the Sunday AFTER Easter. Just imagine what he might have missed! On Low Sunday, we continue to celebrate that Jesus is risen, he is risen, indeed!