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## Twining with Thomas

John 20:19-31

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### Jesus comes in peace

A Roman walks into a bar and holds up two fingers and says "Five beers, please." The reason for that roman numeral joke is that I was thinking about the peace sign and my first Sunday here about a year ago. Typically during the passing of the peace, people shake hands and hug, even in these days since COVID, but here, the tradition has been that most flash a peace sign. I love that! I think it says something about the spirit of this church.

Now, sharing peace may seem a tame greeting—with all the groovy love vibes of a bygone era—but for the ancient Christian church, the sign of peace was given with a force behind it. Traditionally, the practice was even done with a kiss, as a visible display that you were part of an alternate community of belonging, to affirm that you were followers of The Way. Somewhere along the way—perhaps wisely, in light of the spread of germs and cultural norms—*that* practice became a bit less intimate. But no less powerful.

The sign of peace was a protest in a time of violence. You were showing your allegiance to a different kingdom. It was a sign to claim a different set of values by which to live your life. So, what are the signs we show today, to make others aware that we live by the values of an alternate kingdom? With the rise of the MAGA White Evangelical Church here in America, that question seems all the more pressing.

In our Gospel reading on this 2nd Sunday of Easter, Jesus appears to the fearful disciples in the days following the resurrection. And he holds up a peace sign: "Peace be with you." Jesus was addressing their fear, but you get the sense that there was more to it here. The disciples were huddled away only shortly after being commissioned by Jesus to carry on the work. Do you remember those

closing words of Matthew's gospel? "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:19)

And instead of disciple-making, the disciples have cowered in fear. Yet, Jesus greets them with a word of forgiveness. Instead of coming to them with condemnation, a word of peace. In fact, in the text, he says it three times: "Peace be with you". We hear in this, echoes of those three denials by the Apostle Peter. As people of The Way, we are reminded that every act of our misunderstanding and failure, is met with forgiveness and grace.

And we would be hard-pressed to blame the disciples for being afraid. Jesus's body has gone missing and there would have been a legitimate fear that the Roman authorities would be coming for them, as the ones to blame for this disappearance. After all, in the time following Pentecost, they would stone Stephen to death and scatter the church in all directions. Saul would be sent to arrest and kill Jesus' followers. And we know that eventually, nearly all of the disciples would be executed in horrific fashion.

They were right to be afraid—they were human after all—but you get the sense that they had altogether abandoned their calling. One of the disciples, Thomas, was not there with them when Jesus shows up. When the others tell him, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas doesn't believe their testimony, and says "I will believe it when I see it." And while Thomas gets a negative association with doubt in history, we could just as well infer here that the reason Thomas wasn't there to begin with, was because he was actually out doing what Christ sent him to do.

We could just as much assume that Thomas was alone out there risking his own body to keep alive the image of Christ's body in his community? Is Thomas the *only* disciple who understood the assignment? Was Thomas understanding that Christ was a reality you had to work to keep alive . . . while the others were still focused on the material body of Jesus and the soul-crushing move of the state to destroy it?

I'm often reminded of those powerful words attributed to St. Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no body on earth but yours." Think about that for a minute. The implication is, that if we do not put on Christ for our community, Christ's

presence among may be diminished, or absent. If we aren't the church acting in the witness of what Jesus did in his life and ministry on earth, then the memory and potency of that life ceases to be a transformational power among us. Christ has no body *but ours!*

### **The doubt of Thomas**

Among all the usual stories we encounter after Easter—Jesus on the road to Emmaus, Jesus preparing breakfast on the beach, the Great Commission, Christ's ascension, and Pentecost—we have become quite familiar with the story that bears the unfortunate title of "Doubting Thomas." This is due in part because no matter which of the 3 lectionary years we are in—and we're in Year A—this Thomas passage always comes the 2nd Sunday of Easter. Thomas does seem to be a see-it-to-believe-it type, but he also gives the quintessential faith statement we will find in all the gospels: After Jesus acknowledges his doubt, Thomas exclaims: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

Despite all the artwork that depicts otherwise, notice that Thomas never needs to actually touch the wounds of Jesus before making that bold proclamation of faith. His doubt just needed to be acknowledged by Jesus. Could it be that Thomas doubted not his faith, but the testimony of the others who said one thing with their mouths but showed something else by their lives?

I am obviously making a case here for Thomas this morning. I'm also making a case for doubt. Now, I don't need to belabor the point that not only is doubt unavoidable for every human on this planet, but quite essential in the work of faith. I think you are a people that know this well. We revisit this story every year to re-learn this connection between faith and doubt. To understand that faith isn't propped up by certainty but is fired in a furnace of trial, unlearning, and coming to believe again. Faith is quite circular in this way. The post-resurrection story of Thomas reminds us that it is *through* doubt that we get to greater faith. Can we see that our doubts are our way of taking a step back so that we can take a further leap forward? We see this in Thomas.

### **Jesus still carries the wounds of the world**

Now a word about the wounds. The resurrected Jesus still bears the wounds of crucifixion. Do you ever think about that? The risen Savior shouldn't need those wounds anymore. When you defeat death, you should no longer bear the wounds of life. Is Jesus revealing his wounds to these fearful disciples as a way

of teaching them that resurrection isn't about unblemished triumph or invincible glory, but about a life that still bears the marks of suffering—still tender and humble, still vulnerable, still wounded?

I like how one writer puts it: “the true Messiah, acting on behalf of a wounded world, *would* rise as a wounded savior.”

Elie Wiesel (the Holocaust survivor), when asked to describe his faith, used the adjective “wounded.” He said: “My tradition teaches that no heart is as whole as a broken heart, and I would say that no faith is as solid as a wounded faith.” We, like Thomas, sometimes need Jesus to remind us of the wounds of living a life of servanthood . . . lest we think it is all polished morality and glory.

### **Thomas the Standard of disciple, the “Twin”**

There's an early Christian community that holds up Thomas as the standard disciple. In fact, only in 1945 did we discover that there is a Gospel of Thomas, presumably written within this community. We know that Thomas was nicknamed Didymus, which in the Greek means “twin”—and they believed that Thomas was in fact Jesus's twin . . . according to how Christ-like he showed himself to be. You might remember how in the Gospel of John, Jesus is talking with his disciples about whether or not to go into Judea to pay a visit to Lazarus. The others were trying to dissuade Jesus from going, reminding him that the Jews there recently tried to stone him. It was Thomas who said: “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). Doesn't that seem like a Christ-response? . . . to die for those you love—maybe not a physical death, as Thomas was suggesting—but to die to self daily for the sake of serving and healing the world?

Other scholars don't necessarily believe he was Jesus's twin but point out how the nickname Didymus can also mean “two-fold”, pointing to a duality, like having two minds—one marked by faith and doubt, both at once. In this sense, Thomas is all of us. WE are Thomas's twin. We can identify with those moments in life where we don't really know the way, we don't feel so bold, we feel wounded, needing to see proof to continue moving forward . . . and yet, we know other moments when our faith is strong and gives us a great sense of clarity and purpose. We are all like Thomas.

## **A deeper sense of resurrection**

At the least, take comfort in this story again that like Thomas, Jesus returns for you again and again and calls you to his side. Jesus hopes you will have the same vulnerability and honesty to name the things you doubt, to embrace the mysteries of life, and come to fuller faith *through them*, not in spite of them. What can at times be a church full of fearful disciples. Be a Thomas. See faith and doubt as dance partners.

This, I believe, is the deeper sense of resurrection we are being called to live into. The Easter story can otherwise just be nostalgia for us, unless we enter its call to be brave, even to take a step back from time to time, so that we can leap forward in faith.

Church, this Eastertide, the Christ-reality comes to us as a question, and one overflowing with possibility, if we are brave enough to embrace faith in this way. So, I want to close with this greeting from earlier in our service: “The peace of the risen Christ be with you” (*and also with you*). May it be so.