

April 27th message

Today on this 2nd Sunday of Easter, let's take a good look at the disciple Thomas. Just the name Thomas is often synonymous with doubt, based on the scripture we heard this morning. I even knew a couple who told me once how they had named their son, Tom, correctly because as he grew up he questioned everything and viewed many things with skepticism. But today I would like to shed a different light on this disciple.

Thomas is only mentioned a few times in the gospels. The first in John 11 is after the death of Lazarus. John records how the rest of the disciples are afraid to go back to Judea because of the threats to stone Jesus. But Thomas is quoted as saying in verse 16, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him." The rest of the disciples knew that not only was Christ in danger but as His closest companions they could probably be in danger too. Perhaps Thomas had a death wish, but it is more likely that this courageous statement convinced the others that it was time to lay their lives on the line for Jesus if necessary.

Then in John 14: 1-6 Jesus is speaking to His disciples in a scripture reading we may hear at a celebration of life. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

While the others appeared to keep silent, Thomas asked the question that was probably on everyone's mind. Again, he was not afraid. Often our questions and the things we learn strengthen our convictions. It should also be noted how Thomas was not with the rest of the disciples that first time Jesus appeared. Remember how the doors were locked out of fear? We don't know where Thomas was but one thought is how he was not afraid to be out in public.

And finally in the latter part of our scripture, when Thomas is back with the rest of the disciples, we learn of his response to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" This is a full commitment. The original Greek word for Lord meant: sir, master, owner, or ruler. Today, some will not use this term because of implications of this meaning. I personally see a deep commitment in such a reference and as you know use the term often.

We are not sure what happens to Thomas. There is some evidence to support the legend that Thomas went as far as India to preach the gospel. He is considered the Patron Saint of this country. His name in the Indian Language is popular. Legend also has it that he was martyred when he was attacked and killed in 72 AD.

While we will never what happened to Thomas, we can see the devotion he had for his Lord. Often we can get caught up in all the everyday things that occupy our time and our loyalty to our Lord gets neglected. While Thomas had his doubts, he became steadfast in his allegiance to his risen savior. We can learn from his example and apply it to our own lives.

Today, the Sunday after Easter is sometimes called Low Sunday because of attendance in many churches. The excitement of Easter can be over for some and the routine of life can take over. Or it can be the continuation of the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. We can and should be a changed people because of our commitment to what God has done for us. We have this wonderful example of Thomas help us live as Easter people throughout the year!

Today I would also like to share some readings from what has been called the Gospel of Thomas. Perhaps you've heard of it. There is some controversy over such a find. It has strengthened the Gnosticism argument held by some over the centuries. Gnostic views of Jesus differ from traditional Christian views. Most Gnostics believe Jesus was a spiritual entity who appeared to be human. And while many educated people have debated this line of thinking, I won't get into the details, but it is interesting to read and decide for yourself.

This writing was discovered in Egypt, in 1945 among a group of books known as the Nag Hammadi library. It is speculated these works were buried in response to a decree from a bishop around the middle of the 4th century, declaring a strict canon of Christian scripture. The dates of its origins go anywhere from 60 to 140 AD. It is mainly a collection of sayings of Jesus, without any accounts of his deeds or his life and death.

The first words were somewhat troubling to me as they say: These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, "Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death."

The parable of the sower is found in this gospel, is one of those that has the same implications but is a bit different. Jesus said, "Now the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered them. Some fell on the road; the birds came and gathered them up. Others fell on the rock, did not take root in the soil, and did not produce ears. And others fell on thorns; they choked the seed(s) and worms ate them. And others fell on the good soil and it produced good fruit: it bore sixty per measure and a hundred and twenty per measure.

There are 114 sayings in total including the familiar mustard seed parable. Some have the phrase, "he who has ears, let him hear." Others include, "No prophet is accepted in his own village; no physician heals those who know him." "A city being built on a high mountain and fortified cannot fall, nor can it be hidden." "If a blind man leads a blind man, they will both fall into a pit." Several of the beatitudes are included throughout including the 54th saying, "Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven."

And there are also some sayings that don't sound like what Jesus would teach including saying 77: Jesus said, "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

And there are some saying that are just hard to fathom like saying 13: Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a righteous angel." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like." Jesus said, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out." And he took him and withdrew and told him three things. When Thomas returned to his companions, they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?" Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the things which he told me, you will pick up stones and throw them at me; a fire will come out of the stones and burn you up."

While this Gospel of Thomas is controversial and we may not know what to conclude, we do have the example of Thomas in our scripture reading from today. Again we don't know where he was the first time Jesus appeared to the other disciples behind locked doors. Perhaps he was out and about, or perhaps he had hidden himself somewhere else. A week later, though, he was with his companions, perhaps planning their future, or in a wait and see mode. After all that had happened, he was there.

Recently I read another pastor's monthly letter. He spoke of how we are becoming an isolated people. He spoke of his experience at an airport and flying and how people are in their own little worlds with their headphones, laptops, and tablets. He noticed the nervousness of fellow passengers during the flight. One lady across from him never stopped chewing her nails and her leg tapped up and down restlessly during the entire two hour flight. Maybe she was scared of flying or maybe she had a lot on her mind, we'll never know.

He spoke of how we have chosen to live in our own little private, personal electronic bubbles. This causes us to become more isolated and unable to relate and converse with others. It causes us to lack intimacy and empathy for others and what they might be going through.

Once in a while I'll visit with someone who tells me how they are a Christian but they don't attend church. They may have had a bad experience or they may have just fallen away and have other priorities in life. Some will emphasize how you don't have to go to church to be a follower of Jesus.

I listen to their thoughts and then usually say something like, "Well you know, I know someone who is a great basketball player, he tells me about all his great moves and how well he shoots, especially the three pointers. He has a nice court at his home and plays every day. Yet he don't belong to a team, he doesn't share that talent with others. He keeps it to himself.

I think you can see what I'm getting at here. We need the support and fellowship of others. Like Thomas needed to get back with the rest of the disciples, we need the companionship and sharing with fellow Christians. In our self-centered world we need what Jesus teaches about following Him. We get that through prayer, reading scripture, meditation, AND gathering together. May we find that in the days ahead and may the Lord continue to strengthen us for the work ahead. Amen.