"Thomas' Dilemma"

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John 20: 19 - 31

> 19When 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 them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."
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> 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he 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."
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> 26A week later his 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." 27Then 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." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."
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> 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But 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.

Thanks to some very kind friends, Ben and I were able to attend the David Sedaris performance at Carnegie Hall the week before Easter. To be honest, most of what he said and read isn't what you would call "church appropriate," but he did tell one story that I thought relevant to today's text about Jesus, the disciples, and Thomas.

The story is about David's sister, Lisa.

> Lisa had to have her refrigerator repaired and, to her credit, or maybe not to her credit, she admitted to her brother that when the repairperson came, she didn't trust him to be in her kitchen, alone. So, she stayed in the kitchen, making small talk with him while he worked.
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> At some point she had run out of things to say and decided to make a phone call. She picked up her phone from the counter to make a call, but as she did, she got such a withering look from the repairman that she put the phone back on the counter. After a few moments, she decided that it was silly to allow him to decide whether or not she could make a phone call.

So, she gathered her courage, picked up her phone, and started to dial. Only, once again, the look she got from the repairman was so sharp, she put the phone back down again, and just resigned that she would have to wait.

Wait she did. The repairman finished his work. She paid him. Got the receipt. Put it, along with her phone, in her pocket, and walked him to the door. He stepped out of the door. Looking back at her, reached out his hand, and said, "may I have my phone back now?"

It took her only a split second to realize what had happened. Why he had scowled at her when she started to make a call. Why he had looked at her so oddly. She'd gotten it all wrong. It wasn't that he couldn't be trusted, it turned out that she was the one who needed to be looked out for.

Sometimes, we are so locked into to seeing things one way that we forget there might be another explanation.

The story of Thomas is like that.[1]

I have, for most of my years, viewed this story from a singular lens.
Thomas doesn't believe.
Thomas doubts.
Thomas demands Jesus show him the wounds.
Then Thomas believes.
Jesus reminds all of us that we shouldn't have to feel his wounds to believe he is risen.

But there are some problems with that interpretation, and only in part because the text doesn't include a word for doubt[2], but also because it singles out Thomas as the unbeliever, when in

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[1] For this sermon I have relied heavily on two sources:
The Rev. D. Mark Davis, "Breath, Touch, Sight, and Faith," posted on April 22, 2019.
http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/04/breath-touch-sight-and-faith.html
and
the Rev. Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks, 2nd Sunday of Easter - Years ABC John 20.19-31
http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john20x19e2.htm

[2] About the word "doubt" in verse 27. D. Mark Davis translates that phrase as "do not become unbelieving but believing," and writes:
I strongly disagree with the NIV's translation of Jesus last phrase as a separate sentence that reads, "Stop doubting and believe." The words ἄπιστος and πιστός are not verbs; they are adjectives, modifying the verb γίνομαι. (Or, they could be predicates. They are in the nominative case because the verb γίνομαι can take a nominative predicate.) The verb γίνομαι is in the middle/passive voice, which is not uncommon in John's gospel. Its primary meaning is 'to become' but it can simply mean 'to be' or it can take on many shades of meaning.
Brian Stoffregen: Although many translations include "doubt" in v. 27 -- and thus lead to the phrase "Doubting Thomas", there is no Greek word for "doubt" in the verse! The contrast is between απιστος and πίστος (*apistos*and *pistos*) -- the only occurrence of both these words in John. In checking six different Greek Lexicons (yes, I have six of them), none of them list "doubt" or "doubting" as meanings for απιστος (*apistos*). (Words with the meaning of "doubt" are διακρίνομαι (*diakrinomai*); διαλογισμός (*dialogismos*); διστάζω (*distazō*); δίψυχος (*dipsychos*); απορέω (*aporeō*); απορία (*aporia*).) The prefix "a" as in *apistos*, means "not" or "without". For instances, in English, "amoral" means "without morals". "*Apistos*" means "without *pistos*."

fact, that's not the case. Thomas is just the last one to have a Jesus encounter, when every single one of them has needed to see Jesus in order to believe.

First, we have the women who go to the tomb, who the angels or the gardener (Jesus himself), must open their eyes. Then, when they go to tell the disciples, the disciples don't believe them. In Luke, they thought it was an "idle tale."

Even in the Gospel of John, where we are told that two of the disciples run to the tomb and believe Jesus is missing, have apparently let go of that belief, because when we enter chapter 20, where are the disciples? They are in a room, hiding. Hiding out of fear of the Jews, John writes. Jewish authorities, Judeans are other translations.

There are a couple of things we need to say about that. First, we need to establish, that this gospel was not written at the time of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It was written at least a generation later, when the faithful landscape was different. The early community was trying to differentiate themselves from their family of origin. One of the ways that some of the early writers did that was to write negatively about the mothers and fathers of their faith. Judaism is still suffering the ramifications of those choices. One of my seminary classmates, Paul Raushenbush,[3] wrote an article a few years ago in which he said, and I agree with him, "Ignorant or willful misunderstanding of the death of Jesus has led to horrible oppression of Jewish people over the last two thousand years....We can't pretend like these texts don't exist, but we can explain why it is impermissible and a betrayal of Jesus to use these texts to continue the horrible anti-Jewish sentiment that has plagued Christianity."

I want to be clear about this because yesterday there was a shooting at a synagogue in San Diego, killing one and injuring several others. It was six months to the day when 11 people were killed at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Had the gospel writers realized the impact their words would have thousands of years later would they have said things differently? I hope so. But we cannot read words like these in John without stating, clearly, that the Jews did not kill Jesus. Rome did. Authority did. Oppression did. Hate did. We did. **To say differently not only clouds the truth, it encourages some of the worst impulses in our world.**

The second thing we notice about the disciples being in hiding when Jesus comes to them is that it is clear that even though they might have heard rumors about Jesus's resurrection, they have not believed it. Because they are in hiding. The word used for belief here is not referring to an intellectual exercise. It's about action. Belief isn't a verb in these verses, it's an adjective. Something that can be observed, which is not observed if you are hiding in a locked room.[4]

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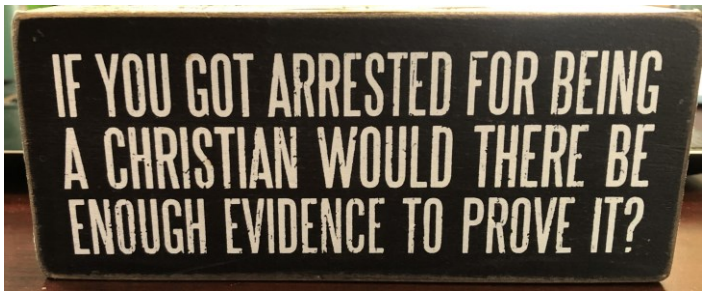
[3]The Rev. Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, "The Thing I Never Want to Hear Again on Good Friday" 04/17/2014 05:11 pm ET, Updated Jun 17, 2014
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/good-friday-anti-semitism_b_5169053

[4] Brian Stoffregen: think the answer given in the text (and throughout John) is that faith is to be based on the word. Thomas should have believed the word from the other disciples: "We have seen the Lord" (v. 25). Similarly, the other disciples should have believed the word from Mary: "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18). The fact that they were still behind locked doors because they feared the Jews indicates that if they had believed the word, it didn't make



A year or two ago, John Wilson gave me a plaque that sits on my desk. It says, "If you got arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to prove it?" That's the kind of belief that the author of John is describing, belief is only belief if there is evidence of it.

When Jesus appears to them, it is then that they really believe. They rejoiced. They received the Holy Spirit. Jesus instructs them on their new life- for now that they believe, their lives do change. They are not followers. They are leaders. The future is different.

But, what about Thomas? Where is Thomas? Had he gone out to get a snack and just missed Jesus' first visit? While we don't know, the tense of the verbs used in the sentence may be indicated that Thomas wasn't merely absent at this moment, he had departed from the group.[5] Was he bereft at Jesus' death? Frustrated that the revolution seems no closer?

We don't know for sure, but it says something, that, after seeing Jesus, the disciples don't let Thomas go? They tell him what has happened. They don't require that he believe before they let him back in, but welcome him back into the room, based not on what he believes but what they believe. What does this say about the church, about ourselves? Are we ever guilty of making decisions about how to treat someone else based on what they believe, or what happens here, based on what we believe?

It is when they are back together that Jesus appears again. Locked doors are not a hinderance, but Jesus immediately shows Thomas the wounds in his hands, and his sides. Thomas finally has what everyone else has received.

Thomas is moved. "My Lord and My God," he says. A profession of Faith.

To which Jesus responds with a blessing, along with blessing those who believe without having seen.

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any difference in their lives. As I've stated in other notes, faith is not really about what we believe, but what difference it makes in our lives that we believe.

[5] D. Mark Davis:
I'm curious about the use of the imperfect form of 'to be' (with a negative particleοὐκ ἦν, "was not being") in v.24 and the imperfect form of 'to say' (ἔλεγον, "was saying") in v.25. It would have been easy to use the aorist tense to say that Thomas *was not* with them, right at the moment that Jesus first arrived. But, by using the imperfect tense, John may be saying that Thomas *was no longer* with them when Jesus came the first time, as if he had given up on following Christ, with them, after the crucifixion. Likewise, if they had only said to Thomas, "While you were out getting bagels one day, Jesus came," the aorist tense would suffice. But, the imperfect, "were saying" implies ongoing past action. Perhaps they were trying over and over to convince Thomas to return. Finally, Thomas threw down the gauntlet, "I'll come back, but unless I see and touch, etc., I won't believe it." I guess I'm seeing the possibility that this was an extended conversation about Thomas' participation in the community, and not just that Thomas happened to miss out on the first visit.

In our world of rankings and competitions, it is understandable to think that John, through Jesus, or maybe Jesus, through John, is ranking the ways in which we believe in this conclusion. After all, John's audience would not have seen and are still believers in Jesus. But the text itself doesn't indicate that. Rather, it seems to refrain from value judgements on how we get to belief.[6]

Blessed are those who believe.
Blessed are those who come to belief because their family brought them to church.
Blessed are those who come to belief because they hit rock bottom and met Jesus there.
Blessed are those who believe even though
they have been wrongly told Jesus doesn't believe in them.
Blessed are those who left the church for a while but who came back when they had children.
Blessed are those who realize when they are 32 years old that they want more,
to know more about something bigger than themselves.
Blessed is the teenager who isn't at all sure what they believe, but shows up anyway.
Blessed are those who believe.
One belief isn't better than another.

The language of belief in John is powerful, because it speaks of so much more than something we think. It's about how we trust. What we trust. Knowing that our life and breath is not ours alone, but a gift from the God who created us. Leaning on the everlasting arms aren't just the words to a hymn, they are a way of life.

When we see this, this way, Thomas isn't the doubter, Thomas isn't the last one to show up at the party. Thomas is a believer. And if anything, maybe he deserves a little more credit for being willing to speak up. For using his mind. For admitting when he could no longer be in the room with the disciples and then, upon seeing Jesus, being able to reverse course, without shame, and proclaim his faith.

We all get into ruts. We all get into routines. We all get into patterns. In life. In relationships. In faith.

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[6]Brian Stoffregen:
It is possible that if there were still eye-witnesses of the resurrected Jesus in the community. They may have thought themselves better than the "not seeing" believers. For John there is no such distinction between believers.
D. Mark Davis:
Somewhere in the transmission of the Greek text, someone decided that the word ὁτι ("that" or "because") should be capitalized and set off with a comma. That is not part of the original text, but an interpretive judgment that was made along the way. Likewise, the question mark is someone's judgment that this is a question followed by a statement. However, ὁτι is often used as a way of setting up a quote and can go un-translated. If that were the case here, Jesus' words could read as two statements: "You have seen me and have believed. Blessed those who have not seen and believed." The reason I want to offer this possibility is to say that Thomas' path may be one way of embracing Jesus, while the path facing John's readers may be another way. By placing two statements side-by-side, perhaps the gospel is simply acknowledging that there are two authentic ways of embracing faith – one is through seeing and the other is through not seeing. In fact, the "blessing" that is conferred on those who will never see and touch Jesus' body may be a way of assuring them that their path of not seeing or touching is as valid as Thomas' path of seeing and touching.

Maybe Thomas is here to today as neither an example to follow or an example of what not to do. Maybe Thomas is here to remind s that the Gospel is truly the gospel when it forces us to see things in a new way. To step out of our routines and patters and allow God to set the agenda.

On last week's public radio program, This American Life, they told the story of a small community in California in the middle of the horrible wildfires this past fall, a community named Helltown.[7]

> As the fire stated, on the first day of that catastrophic Paradise fire, some residents of the Helltown community were on a ridge looking down at their community, trying to figure out what to do, wondering if they would lose their homes, when they saw someone driving through the town. It's a small town, so they recognized the car. They called the driver. It was an off-duty volunteer fire fighter who had decided not to give up on their community, he decided, unwisely, to stay and fight. They decided to join him. For almost 24 hours they waged a non-stop physical fight against the fires threatening their community. They used shovels and branches and chain saws and kayak paddles. It was, they said, like whack a mole, sometimes having to go back three and four times to save the same spot from fires, again.
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> The whole time they thought that they just needed to hang on until the professionals got there. For surely, the fire trucks were coming. Surely, they were on their way. Except that they didn't arrive. And the friends couldn't figure out why. There was no cell service. And even if there had been they couldn't' stop to use their phones. They just couldn't figure out why nobody was there. Why nobody came. Had they been forgotten? Did nobody care about their community?
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> For almost 24 hours they did this, until they finally could do no more, and they got a ride out.
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> Helltown, (the host tells us) is less than four miles from Paradise, which burned to the ground. [These residents of Helltown] spent the whole exhausting night imagining, guessing, that they'd been overlooked. When they drove out, they saw the truth. They hadn't been overlooked. They'd been spared.

They hadn't been overlooked. They'd been spared.

Thomas, this morning, gives us a new pair of glasses through which to see the world.
And to consider where we might be called to see what we have, before, missed, and as a result, believe.

"My Lord and My God," Thomas says. May the evidence of our lives say that, too.

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[7] This American Life, Episode #673, April 19, 2019, "Left Behind: People figuring out how to move through a world in which something important has disappeared."
Transcript: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/673/transcript
Audio: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/673/left-behind