



Sermon

April 28, 2019

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Today's gospel reading from John recounts the tale of Jesus and Thomas, or as he is better known, Doubting Thomas.

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples on at least three different occasions.

In the 24th chapter of Luke, you may be familiar with the story about the two disciples who were on their way to Emmaus. They met a man who overheard them discussing the crucifixion and he asked them what they thought about it. They expressed great sorrow, and, as he was comforting them, he revealed himself as Jesus to them.

Easter morning, we heard how he had appeared to Mary after she had been to the tomb and spoke with the angels and a man who she thought was a gardener. As they were speaking Jesus revealed himself to her. She ran to the disciples with the news that Christ had indeed risen, but they did not believe her.

In today's gospel reading, we heard about how eleven of the disciples gathered a week later in the Upper Room, keeping the doors locked so that no one else could enter the room. Jesus appeared to them and they worshipped Him. After the day of the crucifixion, Thomas had fled Jerusalem, unable to comprehend the events of the week. When he returned a week or so later, the other disciples told him about seeing Jesus, but as we all know, he didn't believe a word of it!

This morning, in order to better understand the relationship between Jesus and Thomas, I would like to compare it to the one between Winnie the Pooh and Eeyore. This may be a rather irreverent way of looking at these two men, but if you think about it, their personalities were very similar!

Winnie the Pooh was always happy-go-lucky, he loved explore new places and to visit and discuss the events of the day with his friends. He was generous (except with his hunny) and always willing to help his friends out of a jam. Jesus, like Pooh, was typically easy-going, very sociable, traveled great distances to meet with his followers and was always happy to help his neighbors, friends and strangers.

On the other hand, we have Thomas. Over the centuries, his nickname "Doubting Thomas" has become part of our slang, describing someone who is a skeptic or who is from Missouri, the "Show Me" state. Thomas, like Eeyore, was always a "glass half-empty kind of pessimistic person, with a streak of fatalism. They had a special relationship that could be described as one of "yin and yang" - Thomas being yin - negative and gloomy, contrasting with the yang of Jesus - bright and positive.

In John 11, when Jesus and his disciples hear about their friend Lazarus's death near Jerusalem. At this time, opposition was increasing against Jesus. When Thomas heard that Jesus wanted to go see Lazarus, Thomas commented darkly, "Yes, let's go there that we might die with him." Unknown to him, his words were prophetic for Jesus.

Eeyore was always looking for the dark cloud, never expecting to see a silver lining. He, like Thomas, was always worried and looking out for everyone else. While both had a dismal outlook, they were fiercely loyal and faithful to their friends.

When Jesus was crucified, Thomas was devastated. His whole belief system was shattered. His lord was humiliated, tortured and hung on a cross like a common criminal. The same crowds who were cheering and singing and hailing Jesus as their King on Palm Sunday were now jeering, spitting and insulting him. Mob mentality is such a powerful force – for good and for evil.

In John's Gospel, belief is about a relationship. When Jesus died on the cross, so too did his relationship with Thomas. Thomas had believed Jesus - he gave him his heart and his hope, but that belief couldn't possibly live beyond the grave. Unless, that is, Jesus did live beyond the grave. That was so hard to fathom, so Thomas wanted proof before he handed his heart over to possibly be burned again.

What Jesus longed for in this post-resurrection encounter with Thomas, is that we all might believe in him by handing over our hearts and our hopes that he might bring them to the fullness of joy. That's what living an Easter life is all about. That's all that Thomas wanted, he just needed to see it, touch it, experience it before he was willing to risk relationship again. Once he realized that this pre-ordained miracle had indeed come true, he fell on his knees and confessed his faith to Jesus saying, "My Lord and my God!"

We all have doubts from time to time, that's a normal part of living the life of faith, so we shouldn't hold it against Thomas for doubting this amazing news!

So - what happened to him? Doubting Thomas did not stay a doubter. When he saw the risen Jesus, everything that Jesus taught over the years clicked in, and to his death, Thomas is an outspoken advocate for his Lord.

Church tradition tells us that he preached in ancient Babylon, near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, where Iraq is today. He traveled to Persia, present-day Iran, and continued to win disciples to the Christian faith.

In 52 AD, he sailed south to Malabar on the west coast of India, where he preached, established churches, and won over to Christ high caste Brahmins, as well as others who continued the traditions long after his passing. When the Portuguese land in India in the early 1600s, they found a group of Christians there worshipping in the Mar Thoma Church that was established through Thomas' preaching a millennium and a half before.

Finally, Thomas traveled to the east coast of India, preaching relentlessly. According to Syrian Christian tradition, Saint Thomas was allegedly killed at St. Thomas Mount, in Chennai, in 72 A.D July 3rd. and his body was interred in Mylapore. Tradition holds that he was thrown into a pit, then pierced through with a spear thrown by a Brahmin. Ephrem the Syrian states that the Apostle was martyred in India, and that his relics were taken then to Edessa.

After his death, the reputed relics of Saint Thomas the Apostle were enshrined as far as Mesopotamia in the 3rd century, and later moved to various places. In 1258, some of the relics were brought to Ortona, in Abruzzo, Italy, where they have been held in the Church of Saint Thomas the Apostle. He is often regarded as the Patron Saint of India, and the name *Thoma* remains quite popular among Saint Thomas Christians of India.

Now remember, this was the disciple who had so fervently proclaimed his unbelief, but, once convinced of the resurrection, carried the Christian message of love and forgiveness to the ends of the earth in his generation.

While diligently researching Thomas for this sermon, I found a rather interesting link to our church! In Paraguay, where our own intrepid traveler, Tim Noe, is currently living, there is an ancient oral tradition retained by the Guaraní tribes of Paraguay that claims that Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, lived among the natives preaching the Gospel and doing miracles in the name of Jesus Christ.

However, despite this and other legends and traditions, no credible evidence exists about Saint Thomas the Apostle and his alleged journey to Paraguay and neighboring lands.

The story of Thomas carries a very important lesson for us all. If he were with us now, Thomas would be speaking to today's doubters, to those of us who have seen our hopes and dreams derailed or even destroyed. When he was alive, over and over again, Thomas would tell his story of how Jesus' life had intercepted his own. He would tell his listeners of his fears and his doubts. And then, with a radiant, joyful face, St. Thomas, Apostle to India, would recount his joy at seeing and knowing the risen Jesus himself. "My Lord and my God!" he would say. "My Lord and my God!".

The words in the anthem sung by our choir this morning, reminds us of God's wondrous love and the willingness of Jesus to sacrifice Himself for our sins. We are so blessed! Amen.