

Pursuing Thomas

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John 20:24-28 — But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So 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.” A 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.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

If all of us were asked to describe the apostle Thomas in one word, most of us would probably say, “Doubt.” And of course, that’s because of the story we just read. This story is one of very few windows we get into the Apostle Thomas’s life. In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he is only a name on the page. In the Gospel of John, he appears just twice before this passage. First, in chapter 11, Thomas professes that he is willing to die with Jesus, and he encourages the other disciples to be willing also. Here, Thomas demonstrates admirable courage and devotion to his rabbi. But second, in chapter 14, when Jesus tells his apostles, towards the end of his life, “You know the way to the place where I am going,” Thomas interrupts and disputes with Jesus. “We don’t know where you’re going — how can we know the way?” Here, Thomas seems a bit disgruntled with his rabbi. Leading up to this morning’s passage in John 20, then, we see one of Thomas’s good moments, in chapter 11, one of his not-so-good moments, in chapter 14, and that’s it. We don’t know anything else. All we can say about him, then, is that Thomas seemed to have both high points and low points. He followed Jesus well on some occasions and not so well on others. In this way, Thomas is just like every other apostle, and like every other person who tries to follow Jesus, including you and me.

Those of us who have heard this morning’s story in John 20 many times would probably summarize it like this: “Thomas asks for physical proof of Jesus’ resurrection, which means that he is doubting Jesus, and the moral of the story is: Don’t doubt like Thomas.” But this morning, I want to suggest that there’s more to the story, and more to Thomas, than that. As I see it, this story isn’t really about doubt, and it’s not really about Thomas, either.

Rewind with me to our first reading. Jesus has risen from the dead, and he appears to his disciples, who are in hiding—understandably so: they’re afraid of getting arrested like Jesus was. Somehow, Jesus gets through a locked door and shows his disciples that he is victorious over death itself. The disciples are stunned and overjoyed. Jesus pronounces peace on them, commissions them to spread the good news, and breathes the Holy Spirit on them.

But in our second reading, we learn that Thomas is not with them at this time, for whatever reason. Perhaps he snuck out to get food for everyone. But regardless of why, when Thomas returns, and the disciples are describing their encounter with Jesus to Thomas, when the disciples exclaim, “We have seen the Lord!” Thomas is realizing that, if what they say is true, he’s missed out on quite a lot. All of the other disciples are rejoicing with one another—and of course they are, for they have seen their Lord, who they thought was dead, alive again! Now, their whole life is revolutionized. Before the risen Jesus appeared to them, his ministry—and the last three years of their lives—seemed like a horrible mistake. But now, it’s the gospel, it’s good news! Surely, they can’t stop talking about what has happened to them. But because Thomas wasn’t in the right place at the right time, he’s the odd one out.

Try to put yourself in Thomas’s position. Like the other apostles, he was with Jesus for three years of ministry. He traveled with him, ate and drank with him, slept alongside him. Like the other apostles, Thomas was struck by immense grief and confusion upon Jesus’s death. But everyone else’s grief and confusion have been transformed into joy. Imagine what he’s experiencing as the other apostles tell him about their encounter with Jesus. Besides the shock of it all, feelings of resentment, envy, and bitterness seem natural to me. And I think that underlying and fueling all of those feelings is fear. Fear that there is a reason why Jesus appeared to the others and not to you. Fear that you must not have been good enough, faithful enough, likable enough, whatever—fear that there is something wrong with you. It’s fears like these, buried deep in our minds and hearts, that drive people to anger, violence, and despair.

So, after hearing a second-hand account of what he longed to see for himself, Thomas responds not by acknowledging or sharing his feelings, but by making a threat: “If I don’t see and touch and press my hands into the wounds myself,” Thomas says, “I will not believe.” “I will not believe.” This isn’t so much about doubt, friends, as it is about what the Christian tradition calls “apostasy”: walking away from the faith. It seems that Thomas, after three years of life and love with Jesus and the disciples, is on the verge of saying, “I’m out.” Still feeling the weight of grief and confusion in the wake of Jesus’s death, feeling shock and envy and fear from the apostles’ story, feeling left out and less worthy than all of his closest friends, Thomas is spiraling downward and seems ready to walk away for good. But he doesn’t right away. He waits around. One day, two days, eventually a full week. And as he waits, I imagine that his threat looms in his mind and in the air of the space that he shares with his friends.

And then, all of a sudden, the most beautiful thing happens: Jesus returns and refuses to let Thomas carry out his threat. The story tells us that the door is locked, but Jesus somehow gets in—determined as he is to bring Thomas back into the community of faith. And it isn’t Thomas who rushes to Jesus at the end of our story, but Jesus who rushes to Thomas, then tells him, “See the nail marks in my hands; put your finger into those marks; put your hand into my side; do not disbelieve, but believe.” Friends, the beauty of this story, as I see it, is the persistence, the relentlessness of Jesus is in his pursuit of Thomas, this fearful follower. It brings to mind the promise that Jesus spoke to his apostles earlier in chapter 14 of John’s Gospel: “I will not abandon you as orphans. I will come to you.”

Here's the question I'm sitting with today: Do we think that God is just as relentless in God's pursuit of us? When we feel that ache of being left out or lonely, when we look around us or look inside us and can't help but feel empty, can we still trust—even just a sliver of trust—that the eternal God is committed to us, that we are not orphans, but God's children? And if we struggle to trust, what do we think stops God? Sinning a certain number of times? A certain sin committed once? A certain lifestyle? A certain addiction? What are we afraid might keep God away from us?

Friends, my prayer today—for you, for me, for all people—is that we would grow more and more in our trust that God loves us with a relentlessly pursuing love. As Paul writes in Romans 8, “neither death nor life, nor angels nor demons, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That's the kind of love that we are invited to receive, and that's the kind of love that we are invited to give. Amen.