

### **Seeing and Perceptive Hearing**

While mentioned in passing just a few times in the story Jesus, the disciple known as the twin comes into prominence one week after Jesus was raised from the dead. And it's in this one story that Thomas becomes known and identified ever since as the disciple who doubted. In fact doubting and Thomas go together so well for us that we most often refer to him as doubting Thomas.

There's something almost winsome about Thomas. Especially for doubters, he becomes the example pointed to whenever doubt about the veracity of something arises—especially related to faith or belief. The presence of Thomas in the Jesus story gives permission to not being easily convinced. The fact that the doubts of Thomas ultimately did not stand in the way of his believing is reassuring when doubt seems to be the order of the day.

But there's more to this story than simply Thomas who doubted and then came to belief in the presence of the risen Jesus. So let's take a closer look.

It's always appropriate to take up this story the first Sunday after Easter since that's when it happens as the story is told. Actually though, there are two parts to the story.

The first part takes place on the evening of that first Easter when Jesus comes into the midst of the disciples who were gathered behind locked doors. They were a scared lot of followers. Perplexed by the reports of Jesus having been raised, encountering some of their women, they are nevertheless overcome with confusion—and understandably so. The man to whom they had devoted three years of their lives had been brutally taken away from them and put on trial and sentenced to an excruciating death by crucifixion, all in a matter of a few hours. How horrifying it must have been for them to stand by helplessly as these terrible events unfolded. Naturally fear and terror would have been at the fore for them. If this is what the authorities were doing to their sacred leader, what's to keep them from coming after his followers as well? Wanting to be faithful to Jesus, yet at the same time being completely confused and bewildered, they were paralyzed into inaction and hiding away from sight and the reach of those who might come after them.

It was into this terrified huddle of his disciples that Jesus shows up and says to them, "Peace be with you." Not only were they being encountered by the risen Jesus, they were also consoled and comforted and challenged by words that Jesus had said to them many times. Peace be with you.

Peace be with you in the midst of your confusion. Peace be with you in the midst of your fear. Peace be with you. Then, to assuage their fear that they might be hallucinating, he showed them his hand and his side so that they could see the scars of the crucifixion he had endured.

And then he said again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then we read, "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'"

It's in the midst of this encounter that the disciples rejoiced and celebrated the reality of what they had been told by the women who had gone to the tomb early in the morning only to find it empty. Furthermore, with Jesus' commissioning words that are followed by the sending of the Holy Spirit which Jesus breathed on them, they are equipped and made ready to pick up the task where Jesus had left off.

Incidentally the breathing on the disciples in which they are renewed and commissioned is the same kind of breathing that God is said to have exhaled when God breathed over the watery chaos in the first creation story in Genesis. So as God breathed into being life itself, including human life, at the beginning of creation, so Jesus breathed new life into his followers who were transformed from fear and dread for the future into those who would come to be the beginning of the Christian church itself—the heirs of which we are today.

But there is an unfinished piece of business. Of the original 12 disciples, there were only 10 of them in that closed and locked room. One of the two missing was Judas who had died by suicide shortly after he realized the gravity of his betrayal of Jesus. The other one was of course Thomas. We don't know where he was that evening. All we know is that he was not there.

So when they do see him, the disciples overcome with joy declare to Thomas that they have seen Jesus in the flesh. Whether it was characteristic of him or not, Thomas is not moved by the testimony of the other 10 disciples. He demonstratively makes clear that he does not believe on the basis of their witness. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails in his side, I will not believe."

A week later, presumably Thomas persists in his resistance to the testimony of his fellow disciples regarding Jesus' resurrection. No doubt they have been talking about it all week long about how they had seen Jesus and that he had talked with them. It's Sunday evening again in that same room behind locked doors; and this time Thomas is among them.

Jesus appears to them again with the greeting, "Peace be with you." Jesus' focus is immediately on Thomas to whom he invites to put his fingers in Jesus' hand and his hand in Jesus' side to verify that he was no apparition, but was indeed the risen Jesus. Although the text doesn't indicate it, I'm guessing that Thomas was humbled as he swallowed hard before saying, "My Lord and my God." His fellow disciples had been right all along and now he too becomes a witness to this amazing news. And then Jesus utters words that are key to understanding, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Although it is not explicit in this story, Jesus' coming to Thomas in the flesh was not so much about acquiescing to Thomas' demands to see for himself. Rather it was about Jesus showing up to verify what Thomas had been hearing from his companions for a whole week. Thomas' failure and lack of faith was less about his need to see for himself and more about how he failed to trust and have faith in those he had come to know so very well over the course of their 3-year sojourn with Jesus.

Right out of the gate, Jesus is making clear that to see and experience the resurrection faith that he gives us in Easter, is all wrapped up in our connections to one another in the community of faith. Seeing the risen Christ for all that followed the first eyewitnesses happened through the collective witness of the community of believers.

It would take another few decades until the apostle Paul came to faith and took seriously this call to build up the body of Christ in which individual Christians are just one part. It's when we are all working together, in concert, in collaboration, in synch with one another that we faithfully display the body of Christ for the world to see.

Those first followers of Jesus, empowered by the triumph over death in Jesus' resurrection, began to share this amazing good news wherever they went. The result of their shared testimony was such that many others came to believe in Jesus. So powerful was their testimony that Christianity began

to grow and spread throughout the region and beyond. We today are heirs of those generations of Christian believers who have gone before us.

If the church had been built solely on the eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection, it would have been a flash in the pan. Those 11 disciples, to whom Jesus appeared, were part of a very special group. They had not just seen. They had not just touched. They had not just heard. They experientially encountered Jesus. In addition to the 11 disciples Jesus appeared to many others. But every last one of those was mortal. So even the youngest eyewitnesses would have lived another 50 years at which time they would have died.

While it was surely a high privilege to have been an eyewitness, thankfully those eyewitnesses did not let their experience lead them to believe that they were somehow more blessed than those who would come to believe without seeing. And thankfully they continued to add to their number others to join in the community of faith.

The Christian church today stands somewhat in contrast to the prevailing individualism of our culture. There are many who need to see for themselves or experience for themselves that which they come to accept or devote themselves to. The community of which we are a part is built on the shared experience of and shared devotion to Jesus.

All year round, of course, but in this Easter season especially may we work with one another, in concert, side-by-side, as collaborators in making real the experience of the risen Jesus for those who come seeking to know what is at the heart of our community.

We have seen the risen Christ through the testimony of that great cloud of witnesses across the ages. Thanks be to God.