

April 8, 2018
Along Came Thomas
Annette Hill Briggs
John 20:19-31

[Jesus Appears to the Disciples]

¹⁹ When 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." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

[Jesus and Thomas]

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ 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."

²⁶ 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." ²⁷ 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 doubt but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

[The Purpose of This Book]

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But 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.

Welcoming the incoming class on my very first day of seminary the president of our school, Dr. Roy Honeycutt, said, "*Men and women, God neither requires nor expects you to put your brains in your pockets to study the Bible*" – a word I had been waiting all my life to hear from someone like him. Someone in a pulpit, in a church, in a classroom.

Granted, “*all my life*” was not a fabulously long time at that point: 22 ½ years. I’d only been reading for about fifteen. Only been reading the Bible seriously for about nine. But still, your whole life is still your whole life, no matter your age. I could have cried with relief to hear, finally, what I hoped was true confirmed by someone Christian, Baptist, and smart – because of stories like Thomas, a story I hated all through high school and college, about which every sermon and Bible study drilled down what a second-rate disciple Thomas was: “*Doubting Thomas*”; *don’t be like Thomas; yeah, Jesus loved him and indulged him but said, “Nobody really wants to be like you, Thomas”* – when I secretly LOVED Thomas for being so straight-up true to himself; for not pretending to believe what he didn’t believe just to save face with the other disciples who clearly didn’t believe it any more than he did but were too chicken to say so out loud.

Sometimes in those college Bible studies I said as much, always timidly, usually to be told I needed to pray more. Which I usually didn’t. Usually I got quiet and stayed quiet, until I couldn’t stand it any more. And just one sentence – “God wants your brain in the room when you are reading the Bible” – and everything changes. Along comes Thomas. So what questions come to these brains of ours?

First of all, where is he? According to John all the other disciples are *hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews*. Why isn’t Thomas there too? Has he gone out for more beer or is he gone for good? Is he at the store or is he back in Galilee, wondering why he ever got mixed up with the likes of that Nazarene in the first place? I get the sense he’s estranged from his friends, given that they have to go find him to tell him Jesus has shown up.

Second, why does Thomas get labeled as the *doubter* for demanding to see Jesus’ hands and sides, when the other disciples don’t get excited about Jesus either until they see those same scars (verse 20)? Nobody calls them *doubters*, and they need the same evidence in order to believe.

Third, why does Thomas get labeled a *doubter* when the Greek word here translated as *doubt* in verse 27 – the word *apistos* – is almost never translated as *doubt*, but rather as *unbelieve*? All over the New Testament *apistos* is *unbelieve*, but to translate it thus here would make the sentence awkward. “*Thomas, do not unbelieve, but believe.*” (In fact, Spell Check doesn’t like it either, so I had to override it when typing it.) But *unbelief* and *doubt* are not the same. Thomas has already clearly stated his unbelief, by his absence and by his own confession when pressed by the other disciples. Doubt is “*I’m not sure*”; unbelief is “*Yeah. No. I’m done.*”

Which brings me to my fourth question about Thomas: why did he go back?

Seeing your friend be tortured and die violently is traumatic; it causes neurological and psychological damage that profoundly affects responses and behavior. Such trauma that

is deep and wide and lasting. I know that from pastoral care and counseling studies. I can bring that knowledge to this passage.

All the disciples were traumatized. No wonder the doors are locked – that is an appropriate response to trauma! So is leaving the scene of trauma. What is not appropriate to trauma is pretending it didn't happen. "*We have seen the Lord!*" the disciples say. If that means, *turns out it was all just a bad dream*, Thomas wants no part of it.

He's not putting his brain or memory or heart or his pain into his pocket, not for anyone. He won't pretend that what happened didn't happen. Not for his friends, not for the cause, not for Jesus himself will Thomas lie about what he knows to be the terrible, horrible, heart-stopping traumatic truth of the last two weeks.

It was the church since then who took his self-protecting unbelief and dialed it down to doubt. Because it's what we do. The pain and trauma we are trying to avoid is impossible to ignore if Thomas refuses to ignore his. Therefore, the interpretation becomes "*Don't be like Thomas.*" Scholar Mary Hinkle Shore writes that *Thomas won't be shamed into believing nor shamed into keeping his unbelief to himself. Neither will he ignore what he knows, to believe something he does not know.*

In thirty years of ministry, I've known a thousand Thomases – ones who have walked away unwilling to ignore what they know, to believe something they don't. They aren't doubters. Doubters are believers more days than not. They are the folks expected not to see what they have seen; not to feel what they have felt; not to ask the questions pulling at their minds; to call it something less than evil or obscene; to pretend it didn't happen or that it didn't hurt, that it really wasn't all that bad. People to whom it's been suggested that if they'd just prayed more or believed better or not read so many books or asked so many questions, faith wouldn't have been such a struggle for them.

I've known a thousand Thomases. And hardly a handful who have come back. So why did he, our Thomas of the Bible, go back? I've three possible explanations, none exclusive of the others. One, his friends went and found him. Having met the Risen Christ, they do what people do: they tell. They find their friends and tell their friends and share this news because it cannot be kept secret – the same way we have to tell people we have a new puppy at our house. It's just too much good news to keep to ourselves. There is something wrong with other people not knowing, especially our friends who are hurting, like they knew Thomas hurt.

Secondly, maybe Thomas went back because part of him was still there anyway. He was AWOL, bodily away from where his heart and mind still were. When couples get divorced, it's rarely all at once. They can be emotionally divorced long before papers are signed. They can also be legally divorced and never emotionally separated at all. At

least in my experience, faith can be aggravating in that the very thing that makes me want to pull away also draws me back: the unknowableness of God.

In John 6, a whole gaggle of Jesus' disciples left him and Jesus asked the twelve, *don't you want to go with them?* And Peter says, *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life"* – which is not exactly NO, is it? But rather, *we would go, but there's nowhere else to go.* Like when I don't want to drink water – but I will drink water, if water is all there is. If eternal life is what we are after, Jesus is all there is.

What Peter doesn't say in chapter 6, but is plainly in the mix of being a follower of Jesus, is: *Yeah, we're staying. Which isn't to say some of your sayings aren't completely incomprehensible while others are downright crazy. But all the same, we're staying but by nothing else on this earth will we ever be better off. Only you have the words of eternal life.*

Of course, I've no idea why Thomas went back. I only know that when Jesus shows up a week later, Thomas is there too. Jesus goes to him, walks right up to all Thomas' trauma and unbelief, raises up his shirt, opens up his hands and offers Thomas exactly what Thomas needs to trade in that trauma for faith in the God who keeps his promises to those with the community and the courage to give this life another look, another listen, another piece of our hearts and minds.

Would you pray with me?