

Thomas – My Twin, My Hero!

Second Sunday in Easter Sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented April 23rd, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 27:62 – 28:10

Believe it or not there are some churches that have so many worshippers that parking is a major concern, especially on mornings like Easter Sunday last week. So the property committee at a mega-church decided they would get a jump on the issue this year by having some Committee Members directing people to spots held open for people of more senior years. As you might imagine, the spots nearest the sanctuary had been filled well before the service began. But then one guy noticed one lone car backing out of a prime spot and he was delighted to see that the next car coming up the road was driven by an older woman who was coming a little late and alone; and he thought, "Well, how wonderful that I will be able to help her get this desirable parking place on Easter." So the self-appointed parking director began eagerly waving her from the street into the lot, as you might direct a plane toward its airport gate. At first, the woman seemed confused about heading into the apparently full lot, so he increased his waving and pointing so she'd see where he wanted her to go, such a prime spot! Well, she turned in and parked, and our proud parking director walked to the car to wish her Happy Easter. She rolled down her window, looking a little confused, and said, "You know, I don't go to this church! I go to the Baptist church right across the street! And I usually have to park way up the street. Thanks for the spot, and 'Happy Easter' to you!"

Have you ever felt like that? Like you got parked some place you weren't sure you really wanted to or should be? The worse is when we park our minds where we don't want to be. It happens! Truth is, most of us have parked our minds around who Thomas was. It happens that most know him as Doubting Thomas. Yes, that's what I was taught in my Sunday School days. Thomas doubted and we must not, under any circumstances, be like him! But you know, the older I have become the more I dislike that parking place the more I want to revise my opinion of Thomas.

The first thing I hope we'll get to see from Thomas' story is that doubt is not always such a bad thing. If you review the lives of the great prophets and saints, from Jeremiah to Mother Teresa, you'll find plenty of evidence of doubt. It's not uncommon at all. It's there, in all the greatest and most faithful lives. And I've actually come to wonder if maybe you can't really possess a vigorous faith until you struggle through doubt, examined it, fight it, and work for it.

The biblical story of Thomas is found only in the Gospel of John. It is said that Thomas was a twin although we never get to know his twin in this gospel. Or do we? Critical to the story is this: Thomas is doubtful and says he will not believe until he can see and touch the resurrected Jesus for himself. Or in other words, Thomas wants proof in the form of empirical verification. But what's wrong with that? Wouldn't you want proof? In our scientific age we have all been trained to verify through sensory experience, empirical evidence. Well, me too! You see, I am the unnamed twin of Thomas. And so are you!

Jesus says for the benefit of all of us who are his absent twin, "Blessed are those who have *not* seen, and yet have come to believe." That line is intended for us, of course, who cannot verify, cannot amass proof. Is this not just grasping at straws?

Theologian Henri Nouwen told us a story about an experience that helped him with his faith. Nouwen was a fan of the Flying Rodleights, who were German trapeze artists. Nouwen, a Catholic priest, says that he greatly admired these acrobats and they befriended him and even let him practice with them on the trapeze. Once, Nouwen recalls, he asked the leader of the troop about flying through the air. The leader said, "As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air. I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me. The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms that his catcher will be there for him."

We live like the flyer on the trapeze, spinning and swirling through life, unable to see where we are headed. We can't see or touch or prove the existence of a catcher who won't let us fall. But nevertheless, we must learn to reach out our hands and believe that we will be safely caught and held. Blessed are those who cannot see, yet who have come to believe, because sometimes reaching out in faith, unseeingly, but trustingly, is really the only way open to us. How can we conclusively prove love or friendship or hope or faith? We can't. But we know they exist. We feel them. And day by day, and even moment by moment, we need to hold out our hands and just trust we'll receive them.

I hope we'll see in this story of Thomas that it's about the imperative of staying near to our friends in faith. Thomas had lost his trust, you see. He couldn't reach out in faithful confidence to anyone. Did you notice that Thomas missed seeing Jesus in the first place because he had left the room where all the disciples gathered...he had left the others? But he was granted all he needed for belief when he came back and stood with his fellow disciples.

Come to think of it, the most important part of what this story is teaching us is that we will find the assurance we need for belief most readily in the fellowship of others; and isolation from your church always leads to a road of skepticism and atheism. Being with likeminded and faithful people holds us on the right path.

A 97-year-old woman who, looking back, said she had learned the most important lesson of her life when only a teenager. She and a group of friends had decided one afternoon to climb Mount Rundle in Banff, Alberta. Before they were able to descend, a late afternoon fog rolled in and enveloped them all in its thick, obscuring whiteness. They couldn't see the way ahead, and so they agreed they would move down the mountain very slowly, inch by inch. And they agreed they would all hold hands and they would not, under any circumstances, let go of each other. Remembering the event years later, the woman said of this experience: "Sometimes all I could see was the hand

ahead of me and the one behind me. Sometimes my arms ached so badly I thought I would cry out loud, but that is how we made it at last. We found our way home by holding on to one another.”

What a metaphor for church people who work at maintaining durable and trusting relationships with other searching and faithful people. Of course occasionally we'll get lost and be unwilling to credit insightful people into the way ahead. But if we can hang together, we can cover some pretty rough terrain, safely and securely. I find myself today honoured to be part of the church universal that keeps trying to hang together. So often I have witnessed someone reach out, take a hand, grab hold of somebody in danger or alone or falling.

Thomas touched the open wound of his Lord. Do you know what Thomas does next? He gets up out of that locked room where he and the others found the proof they needed of Christ's spirit alive and well, and he went out to serve in that spirit, until his death--fearlessly and with utter conviction! So Thomas has become something of a hero to me because of that, and in so many ways he is my twin!

What could get in the way of God's love for you? Closed doors? Doubts? Demands? Illness, hardships, failings, mistakes? No, nothing can separate us from God's love! All I have seen teaches me to trust God for all I have not yet seen. Let's not settle for parking our minds and our beliefs anywhere else than in the assurance of God's eternal, unconquerable love for us! Amen.