

Sermon for Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19-31 Thomas

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.'

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.'

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. [NRSV]

Writing or making a sequel can be tricky. In the record industry they talk about the "difficult second album" where an artist has had a very successful debut album, using all their best material from before they were signed up. They then have to produce a follow-up, and unless they are particularly talented, it can be a challenge. Tapestry by Carole King is the best example I can think of as an exception to the rule.

The same can be true of movies, although again there are some that break the pattern, especially when it's clear there was a plan to make a whole series. Some of the later Harry Potter films are better than the first one, for example, and some critics regard the Empire Strikes Back as the best of the original Star Wars trilogy.

This all came to me as I read our Gospel reading for today from John. Last week we had an extraordinarily dramatic scene. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb, filled with grief, and finds to her horror that the stone sealing the tomb has been rolled away. She summons help, and Peter and John discover that the tomb is empty. Mary is then left on her own, encountering a stranger who knows her name, who she assumes to be the gardener. Then there's the big "reveal". Mary has in fact met Jesus, risen from the dead, and he's talking to her first out of all of his friends. The scene ends with her unable to cling on to him; instead she follows Jesus request to go and find the disciples and tell them what has happened.

It's interesting to see how the other Gospel writers deal with the problem of bringing the story to a close. As we have it, Mark leaves us with a cliff-hanger – the tomb is empty and that's it (the oldest manuscripts don't go beyond verse 8) Matthew and Luke take us through appearances of Jesus to the episode we call the Ascension – the final farewell to Jesus in bodily form on earth.

John gives us a sequel to the Easter account here in the passage for today, and there is a further sequel in chapter 21 (many believe it was written by someone else as verses 30 and 31 of today's passage read like a conclusion)

Now whenever you read anything from the Bible, a good question to ask is why is this here. Why was this incident or episode included in the overall narrative. Put bluntly, why did John think it necessary give us the story of Thomas? What's the message of this story?

First let's remind ourselves of the background we have on Thomas. He's described as a twin, but we don't know the name of his twin. Thomas is in the lists of disciples in Matthew Mark and Luke. We also know he's with the disciples meeting after Jesus has ascended in the first chapter of Acts.

Uniquely in John, we actually hear from Thomas on 3 occasions. The first is just before Jesus and his disciples set off to Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him. (John 11:16)

I've often wondered how exactly we are meant to read that. Is Thomas just a bit of a miserable sort, or is he a bit cynical. Perhaps he's just saying what everyone is thinking. After all, Lazarus has died young, which may have been due to a communicable disease, so going straight there could expose them all to infection. It all sounds strangely familiar in this present context. Whatever the tone of his voice, Thomas is clearly someone who will speak up.

The second occasion is in John 14 when Jesus is speaking to his disciples and trying to get across to them the explanation and meaning to his predictions of death and resurrection. To illustrate this, Jesus talks about his death as a journey.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴ And you know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (John 14:3-5)

Perhaps we have a hint here that Thomas likes things literal and concrete. It's no good Jesus talking symbolically about death being a journey to a place he has prepared, Thomas wants to know where it is, and what the route is. Whether he found Jesus' answer of "*I am the way, the truth and the life*" satisfactory, we are not told.

That means our background on Thomas is that he seems to like things concrete and clear, and he's quite a realist.

So, it's not entirely surprising that he is the one who features in this resurrection story – the sequel to last week. However, in doing so he adds a new dimension to the story; this is not just a repeat of last week.

First of all, Jesus appears to his followers in their hideaway. The doors are locked, and they are afraid. John says they are afraid of "the Jews", but we have to remember that Jesus and all of the disciples are also Jews. From this, it is clear that John uses the term to describe the religious authorities, and not to mean all Jewish people. This is an important distinction to make, as it has sometimes been used to fuel anti-Semitism. Here Jesus appears to the disciples and shows them his wounds, and they are delighted.

I think we are to conclude that John wants to confirm Mary Magdalene's story. Her testimony would have been suspect for some people, but John narrates the story in a way that shows that her report to the disciples that we heard last week is entirely reliable. We usually think of Luke's gospel as the one that values women, but here John affirms Mary in a very significant way.

However, Thomas wasn't there. Whether it was overwhelming grief, or fear of being caught, or just that he found being back with his family more comforting we are not told. Whatever the reason, he missed this vital encounter, and so a week later Mary and 10 disciples have experienced something he hasn't.

Thomas' response is the classic one of a practical, concrete, empirical sceptic. Unless I see... The evidence he wants is not testimony or reports, he wants to see Jesus for himself, see the scars, touch the wounds. However, he is sufficiently curious to be with the disciples the following week, and this time he is offered exactly what he asked for by Jesus.

The only response that John records is an extraordinary one. Thomas makes a declaration of faith that goes way beyond anything any of the other disciples have come out with. He says to Jesus "My Lord and my God." That statement is a remarkable departure from what the disciples would have been brought up to believe in a Jewish community.

John is narrating to us a moment of revelation. Back in chapter 1 he describes Jesus as the Word made flesh. Here Thomas calls Jesus Lord and God, and then John in his original conclusion says that he wrote the gospel to persuade us that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. In that sense everything he has recorded in the rest of his gospel account is the explanation and justification for these statements which act as kind of bookends.

Thomas is often described as doubting Thomas, and that is the English word used in this translation. A more literal translation would be "stop unbelieving and believe". It's almost as if Thomas is being presented to us as an example of what putting faith in Jesus looks like. And to confirm that, it's almost as if the last part of what Jesus says is directed at us, rather than Thomas. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v.29)

The story of Thomas is indeed a great sequel, as it takes the story to new depths and new levels, and we can see why John thought it was important to include:

- It affirms the witness and testimony of Mary, even though many might have felt they had reason to doubt her.
- It shows the first real declaration of faith in Jesus as we understand him – the Son of God – God with us.
- It emphasises that we, who don't have the opportunity of meeting Jesus in bodily form, are blessed even though we have not had the privilege of that experience. John connects what has taken place with where we are now.

So as sequels go, today's reading is a pretty special one. John doesn't just report events that have taken place, he makes the connection with whoever may be reading in whatever age, asking us whether we follow Jesus and whether we believe, and reassuring us that if we do, we are as blessed as the disciples.