

Who Was Thomas?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 20:19-31

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The story of Thomas is a story that is traditionally told on a Sunday when the daffodils are still in bloom and the pollen still blows in the air, but when the chocolate bunnies have all been eaten, and the Easter baskets have all been put away. The story of Thomas, in other words, is a story we tell on the Sunday after Easter, or what we clergy types like to call “The Second Sunday of Easter.” You may not know that Easter is not just a single day, it is a season in the church, much like Lent is a season or Advent is a season.

Well, the story of Thomas is a story that is told on the Sunday after Easter because it is in many ways a continuation of the story of Easter. The Easter message that we proclaim to the world after all is that because Christ was raised from the dead, we no longer have to live in despair; we no longer have to live in darkness and gloom. The world can now go on in hope. The world can now smile and rejoice. But I think that all of us who are Christian recognize that the Easter story is only a story which should make the world hopeful or joyful if it is a story which is true. If the Easter story is false, if the Easter story is *just* a story, then what’s the point of being hopeful, what’s the point of rejoicing? That is where the story of Thomas comes in.

The story of Thomas is the story of someone who doubts that Christ has been raised from the dead, or at least doubts that Christ has been raised from the dead in any real way. Maybe the risen Christ is just an illusion, or he is just a ghost. But Thomas does not seem to think that whatever happened on Easter Sunday was the resurrection of a real person whom he could reach out and touch—And how do we know that? Well, we know that because Thomas tells us

as much. He says “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

The story of Thomas is the story of someone who doubts and in the many, many years since that first Easter, we have come to know Thomas as Doubting Thomas—but the story of doubting Thomas is not really a story about him is it? No, it is a story about us, it is a story about all of us who have ever doubted the resurrection in our awareness, our sober awareness that the resurrection is only good news if it is true, and so we ask ourselves “Is it true? Is it really true that on Easter Sunday Jesus got up out of the grave?”

Well, today as it is now once again the Sunday after Easter, and as it is once again the time to tell the story of Thomas, I wonder if this year we shouldn’t ask ourselves if all of this isn’t just some big mistake. The problem I think is that we have told the story of Thomas as the story of someone who doubts, but that is not who Thomas was. At least it wasn’t *just* who he was. He was a real person. Now Thomas is not someone we know much about. Apart from this story, he appears only twice in the gospels. Once he appears in the eleventh chapter of John when Jesus is getting ready to head to Judea to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead, but the trip is dangerous because the last time Jesus was in Judea he was nearly stoned to death. The other disciples don’t want Jesus to go, but Thomas says “Let us go that we may die with him.” The second time he appears is when Jesus gives a kind of farewell speech to his disciples in John Chapter 14. Jesus tells the disciples that he has to go away to prepare a place for them but they know the way to the place where he is going. Thomas says, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” We also know that Thomas’ name means “twin”, so maybe he had a twin brother or twin sister. But that is about all we know about Thomas. But

even though we know very little about Thomas, Thomas was still someone, someone with a name. He was someone with a face, he was someone who was tall or short, he was someone with a personality, maybe he was comical or he was serious or temperamental or gentle or shy. He was someone who had a favorite food and a favorite color, he was someone who had a wife and children or who didn't have any children or who didn't have a wife. He was someone, the only one in all of history who was just like him. We don't know all these things about Thomas, we don't even know why it was he doubted. But not knowing these things does not mean that he doesn't have some kind of story to tell, and there is more to his story than just that he was someone who doubted.

Well, you might say, "I don't deny that Thomas was someone, pastor Rich, but why should I care who he was? Why should I care what he looked like or whether he preferred fish or lamb? What I want to know is if the resurrection is real. What I want to know is what I should do with all my doubts." I understand. But here's what I think. The story of Easter, you see is not about whether you have faith in the resurrection or whether you doubt the resurrection. The story of Easter is about the risen Christ. Easter is not about an event, it is about a person. It is about a person, a real person just like Thomas, who we as Christians happen to believe was raised from the dead. Now, I know we all know that. But here's what we may not know. As we go around proclaiming to the world the good news about the risen Christ, I think we will find that if we do not care who people like Thomas were, then we will have a hard time convincing the world that they should care who the risen Christ is.

As Presbyterians, I think it is fair to say we are usually a pretty educated lot. Survey after survey shows that while Presbyterians are not necessarily the most educated religious group in

America, we are among the most educated—and in fact if you go to some small towns in this country, there are sometimes more college degrees and master's degrees and professional degrees in the local Presbyterian church than there are in the rest of the town combined. And one thing that I think educated people are easily able to do is to think in the abstract. We Presbyterians are good at abstract thinking. We are good at having topical sermons and Sunday school classes that don't just tell stories but they are on abstract topics like the resurrection, the crucifixion, the Trinity, and so on. We care about issues in the abstract like homelessness and hunger—and there is nothing wrong with thinking in the abstract, in fact, if you can't think in the abstract at all, it makes it a little hard to be a Christian. For imagine if you would, that you couldn't think in the abstract at all. Imagine, for instance that you weren't capable of caring about issues like hunger but only caring about specific hungry people with names like Bob or Jason or Nicole. Well, then you might say "I don't see why I should be a part of the hunger walk in two weeks, I don't know any hungry people." You might not know any hungry people, but you have to be able to think in the abstract to be able to care about people who you don't know by name, whom you don't know personally. But while being able to think in the abstract is a good skill, what I sometimes think gets lost in all this abstract thinking is that we ought to care about knowing the names of hungry people. We ought to care about knowing the names of homeless people. We ought to care about knowing the names of people in prison and people who do not believe the gospel and the people we are helping right now in the Hartville Migrant Ministry. Because it is in these individual people, in these individual people with names and faces and stories that we see the risen Christ who himself had a name and a face and a story.

That, ultimately is what this Thomas story is about. It is not about a man who placed his finger in the nailmarks of Christ and his hands in the side of Christ in order that he might believe in the resurrection—not at all! It is about a man with a name. It is about a man with a name who doubted the resurrection for what were his own particular reasons, whatever those reasons were. Maybe he doubted because some things happened in his life that made him lose hope. Maybe one too many people were simply rude to him; maybe one too many people didn't tell him how much they appreciated him. Maybe one too many people whom he needed when he was young and growing up simply didn't believe in him. Maybe something happened to him to make him believe that the world would always be a bleak and hopeless place, and the resurrection sounded just a little too much like a fairytale. Who knows what happened to him? But for whatever reason, he doubted for his own particular reasons, but one day he puts his fingers in the nailmarks and his hands in the side of someone else, some other real person with a name and a story and a face, and that name and story and face was all the healing that Thomas needed. It was the answer to whatever in his life was broken, whatever in his life caused him to doubt.

As your pastor, I am aware that here at Northminster, we cannot possibly know the names and faces and stories of every person in this community, let alone this world. We can do work to care about people in the abstract, people whom we classify as homeless and hungry and abused and neglected, and among those people we help, we can learn some of their names from time to time and we can learn each other's names. But don't think your name doesn't matter, don't think your story doesn't matter. Don't think whatever happened in your life that brought you faith or that brought you to a point of doubting doesn't matter. That is what this

Easter season is about. It is not about a resurrection, but a risen Christ. It is not about an event, but a person.