

Title: Thomas the Twin
Text: John 20: 19 – 31
Date: April 8, 2018

If you missed church last week for any reason, there is no need to worry. We are still in the season of Easter.

I wonder if I raised any eyebrows among visitors last week when I made reference to the “Cosmic Christ.” I know that you regulars are used to this. I acknowledge that it may sound a little “far out” to some. Even so, I want to assure you that it is not as though I am making this stuff up. Though perhaps off your radar, it does tap into a vein of thinking that some of the earliest Eastern Fathers brilliantly gave voice to; people like Origen of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, Symeon the New Theologian, and Gregory of Nyssa. Heck, even Paul Tillich talks about “**The Eternal Now.**” These were people who approached the Christ story from a different perspective, compared to those focused on disciplines of modern textual criticism.

One of the reasons I bother to comment on this is because I am thrilled that you are a people that are open to being exposed to new ideas. If something sounds different from what you have heard before, you are not prone to rush to judgement. You keep an open mind. In a real sense this church caters to what I would call “inquisitive Christians.” I certainly commend you in this regard! Let me delve into our text for a little bit now, but you will soon discover why receptivity to new ideas is on my mind today.

Many Christians who scan our text today quickly conclude, “Oh, this is the story about Doubting Thomas.” How unfortunate to be doomed to forever carry a title like that. Don’t we all deserve to be viewed as more multi-dimensional than that? And doesn’t the moniker of *Doubting* Thomas sound a bit disparaging? On other occasions I have used this text to preach on the importance of freely expressing doubts in a safe environment. I like the way Frederick Buechner puts it: “**Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.**”

That being said, this passage represents an important time of transition in the life of the early church. We are transitioning from a time when we have those who claim to be eye-witnesses to a resurrected Jesus, to a time when people are simply hearing the story. Thomas is right on the cusp of this changing era, for he starts off as one who only heard reports of this phenomenon, and then becomes one who is an eye-witness himself. Historically they are all not far removed from a time when we predominantly resort to telling the story. That is why this account ends with Jesus saying, “**Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.**” (John 20:29)

Rather than focusing on the important topic of doubt – *and* the real cost of certainty – I wanted to take this opportunity to talk to you about Thomas a little bit. Our text refers to him as “**Thomas (who was called the Twin).**” Interestingly enough, Thomas is not a proper name, but simply means “twin” in Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke. So it is really something of an Aramaic nickname.

Now I think most of us know that John was written a little later than the other gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and looks at things from a slightly different perspective, and uses some unique vocabulary. Many are *not* aware that at the same time that the Gospel of John was taking shape, another piece of writing called *The Gospel of Thomas* was also taking shape. I know that there is a subset of you that have presumably studied this in some detail, so this is for the

benefit of the rest of you. Even so, the reason why many are not aware of this is because the Church Fathers (and yes, they were Fathers) gave the nod of approval to the Gospel of John, but *not* the Gospel of Thomas.

Broadly speaking, the Gospel of Thomas – and other similar literature – is referred to as gnostic literature, and some of this was likely seen as a threat to the early church. One of the reasons why this is of interest to me is because I took several classes at Columbia University with Elaine Pagels, who is recognized as one of the world's foremost gnostic scholars. She was a super-engaging professor. I found myself developing a connection with Dr. Pagels, and we corresponded as recently as last year just to compare notes on what was going on in our lives.

I am also interested in this because over the years I have transitioned from “defending the faith” against Gnosticism, to becoming more appreciative of Gnosticism. So then, when we look at the Gospel of John, it might also be informative to look at a Gnostic perspective at the same time. Are you with me? As “progressive Christians,” I am banking on you being more open-minded than the early Church Fathers! OK?

One of the differences you will find when comparing the traditional gospels with gnostic literature relates to *how we know things*. The account of the resurrection appearance we are dealing with in John relates both to direct evidence of the resurrection, as well as the power of verbal testimony. By contrast, Gnostic literature speaks of the power of inner testimony. There is a line in the Gospel of Thomas that reads [as translated by Prof. George MacRae] **“Jesus said: ‘If you bring forth what is hidden within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.’”** I don’t know about you, but I find that premise to be extremely compelling. It represents a significantly different portrayal of one on a faith journey. Rather than relying on logic, and debating concepts, there is an assertion that significant knowledge can be realized by looking within. More than just navel gazing, this is founded on a sacred view of self – a high view of being made in the image of God.

There is another quote from the Gospel of Thomas that I find compelling, and might be worth your while reflecting on: **“If you are searching, you must not stop until you find. When you find, however, you will become troubled. Your confusion will give way to wonder. In wonder you will reign over all things.”** This passage sounds very similar to The Sermon on The Mount, doesn’t it, where we read, **“Seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”** (Matt. 7:7) Similar, yes, but it almost sounds like it is taking us deeper, and describing with realism the stages of a quest with more experiential insight. It makes you wonder why these texts were considered “heretical,” and only canonical gospels were considered “orthodox.”

We don’t seem to be prone to experience awe and wonder these days, do we? In Mark’s gospel we read, **“And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed.”** (Mark 16:5) Can you remember the last time you were amazed on your quest to meet Jesus? I rather think that is worth reflecting on!

Our passage this morning concludes: **“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ . . . and that through believing you may have life in his name.”** (John 20: 30 – 31) Church folk talk a lot about belief, but we tend to think about it in terms of propositions to be affirmed. While many Bibles will title John 20:30-31 as “The Purpose of John’s Gospel,” these verses are so much more. They are a summary of the purpose of scripture in general, and that purpose is more than informational. Johannine scholars *love* to make these verses the conclusion to the Fourth Gospel. One Johannine scholar, Karoline Lewis, writes:

“Belief in John is never a noun, but always a verb, and believing in Jesus is to be in relationship with Jesus. . . . believing is not creedal, but relational.” I believe Thomas would agree.

We already mentioned that Thomas was a twin, but whose twin was he? In the gnostic Gospel, Jesus reveals to Thomas that **“whoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and I myself will become that person, and the mysteries shall be revealed to him.”** Elaine Pagels is convinced that, for the Gospel of Thomas, encountering the “living Jesus” means recognizing “oneself and Jesus as, so to speak, identical twins.”

In a different gnostic text [Book of Thomas the Contender], Jesus addresses Thomas as follows:

“Since you are my twin and my true companion, examine yourself, and learn who you are . . . Since you will be called my [twin], . . . although you do not understand it yet . . . you will be called ‘the one who knows himself.’ For whoever has not known himself knows nothing, but whoever has known himself has simultaneously come to know the depth of all things.”

Do you see a whole new world opening up to you? Think of these two lines of thinking as *complementary*, not contradictory. It’s not “either / or;” it’s “both / and.”

I know many of you like Wendell Berry, so let me include a quote from him, and you tell me if this doesn’t sound gnostic to you:

“The world cannot be discovered by a journey of miles, no matter how long, but only by a spiritual journey, a journey of one inch, very arduous and humbling and joyful, by which we arrive at the ground at our own feet, and learn to be at home. It is a journey we can make only by the acceptance of mystery and of mystification . . . ”

Now when you get home, read the poem by Derek Wolcott on your bulletin cover one more time.

**The time will come
when, with elation
you will greet yourself
arriving at your own door
and each will smile at each others welcome**

Amen.

John 20: 19 – 31 (NRSV)

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.