

## **Be a Thomas Truthseeker: Destroyer of Conspiracy Theories**

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Rev. Dr.

David Gardner Tweed

### **Introduction**

In spite of all we have heard & all we have seen, it is often hard to believe. Because it is hard to believe, we will invest ourselves in the Easter mystery for fifty days (a week of weeks). Because it is hard to believe, John the evangelist will provide sign after sign celebrating Jesus' victory over death. Because it is hard to believe, the risen Jesus will return to us again & again in the mystery of holy communion, inviting us to touch & taste his presence, & offering us his peace. The church keeps Easter for 8 Sundays. Early Christians referred to Sunday as the 8<sup>th</sup> day, as if the extraordinary day of resurrection could not fit w/in the normal week of 7 days. The resurrection begins a new recording of time. The 50 days culminates at Pentecost. Each Sunday, individually & communally, we meet the risen Christ in word & sacrament.

### **Gospel: John 20:19-31**

*The unprecedented events of the day of resurrection continue as the risen Jesus appears to his fearful disciples. A week later, after Thomas worships Jesus, Jesus pronounces that the blessings of the resurrection are also for those who "have not seen & yet believe."*

<sup>19</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, & the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Judeans, Jesus came & stood among them & said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands & his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them & said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." <sup>24</sup>But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>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 & put my finger in the mark of the nails & my hand in his side, I will not believe." <sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were again in the house, & Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came & stood among them & said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here & see my hands. Reach out your hand & put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." <sup>28</sup>Thomas said to Jesus, "My Lord & my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen & yet have come to believe." <sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the

presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, & that through believing you may have life in his name.

In this the 1<sup>st</sup> concluding chapter to the gospel of John, written in perhaps the late 90s, the Spirit handed over at the death of Christ (19:30) is distributed to the disciples. The narrative indicates that by the time of the writing of the Gospel, Christians were regularly assembling on the first day of the week. The chapter moves the Easter proclamation from the disciples, through the unbelievers, to those who encounter this good news. The evangelist claims that the gospel book, proclaimed at the Sunday assembly, manifests Jesus as Christ, the Son of God, who gives life in his name. The church continues the pattern alluded to in John's gospel, of assembling on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the week to receive the Spirit of the cross & resurrection & to exchange the peace of Christ. As we expect of John, the narrative in chapter 20 testifies to the identity of Christ as Lord & God. For Christians, to touch Christ is to touch God, & we do this in the flesh of our neighbor's hand at the peace & with the bread of Christ in our palm at communion.

Early on Easter Day, Mary Magdalene has discovered that Jesus' body is missing from the tomb; the stone door is open, so it looks as though someone has stolen it (v. [1](#)). She has seen a man standing near the tomb. When he speaks to her, she recognizes him as Jesus. She has told the disciples: "I have seen the Lord" (v. [18](#)). Later the same day, Jesus joins the disciples, gathered behind locked doors. He shows them that he is the one who was crucified (v. [20](#)). Jesus confers on "the disciples" (not including Thomas, but perhaps a group larger than *the ten*) "peace" (vv. [19](#), [21](#)) & "the Holy Spirit" (v. [22](#)). As God "breathed" life into Adam, the *proto-human*, so Jesus now breathes the new, spiritual, life of recreated humanity into his followers. Aided by the Spirit, they continue Jesus' judicial role in the world, forgiving the sins of the faithful & holding others blameworthy ("retain", v. [23](#)) for their actions. Thomas is expected to believe without having seen, but he demands: *show me the evidence!* (v. [25](#)) The next Sunday, the community gathers again (v. [26](#)). Upon seeing, Thomas makes the most complete affirmation of faith of anyone in the gospel (v. [29](#)). Henceforth the faith of all Christians in all ages will rest on the testimony of the first believers. Vv. [30-31](#) tell us John's purpose in writing the book. His eyewitness account is intended to help us, who were not witnesses of Jesus' life, death, resurrection & ascension to "come to believe" & thus "have life in his name", eternal life.

**Overview - Can I Get a Witness?**

The texts for today explore what it means to be a witness: the power of seeing & experiencing the resurrection firsthand. For those of us who weren't there in person to witness Christ's death, resurrection, & ascension, a question persists: How do we give witness? How have we experienced Easter firsthand? What do we need to see, to touch, to hear in order to believe? The witness given in our readings today is extraordinary. "Doubting" Thomas comes up with one of the most powerful, concise creeds in all of scripture: "My Lord & my God!" (John 20:28). Peter & the apostles affirm their belief in Christ at great risk to themselves & their families. The Spirit is at work, giving ordinary, doubting people extraordinary boldness to declare the core beliefs of Christian faith. God works in surprising ways, through unexpected people, to share the good news of Easter. With the Spirit's help, we can give witness too.

### **Denominational Resource**

Sunday after Sunday, Christians are joined across time & space in the words of the creeds. We profess what we as a community believe, but sometimes the words can become rote. Familiarity can be a comfort, but it can also lull our imaginations to sleep. As we hear Thomas's passionate confession of faith this week, perhaps we might look at our own creeds with new eyes. Consider incorporating reflections on the Apostle's Creed from [\*Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections\*](#) (Augsburg Fortress, 2019).

### **Testimony**

The narrative in Acts 5 gives us a sense of the boldness of Peter & the apostles after they are filled with God's Spirit. They defied authority & risked incarceration & death, all in the name of Jesus. Drawing inspiration from our ancestors in the faith, we too are called to be bold in our proclamation & witness, in both word & deed.

### **Images in the Readings**

Usually depictions of the crucified or risen Christ include the marks on his **hands & side**. Our archeological knowledge is that for crucifixions, nails were driven through the wrist ought not negate the symbolism of the palm, which is central to a person's hand. Neither need we get fascinated by the accounts of the stigmata, for we all carry the mark of the crucified & risen Christ on our palm each time we receive the body of Christ at communion. Easy talk about healing from one's wounds can be replaced with the Johannine image of the wounds: like Christ, we may scar, rather than heal. In John

19:34, blood & water flow from the wound on Jesus' side, & church tradition has seen in this detail not an erroneous description of human anatomy, but rather the proclamation that baptism & eucharist flow from the wounds of Christ. Each year on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter we meet **doubting Thomas**. He is all of us, & we doubters are glad to share with all other doubters the peace of the risen Christ. It is not easy to believe that we too have felt the wounds of Christ. Faith is trust in what is unseen. According to John, the believing community assembles each **1<sup>st</sup> day** of the week, which was not until the mid-4<sup>th</sup> century a holiday. Christians have continued this practice, thus to meet the risen Christ. No single description of God is sufficient, & today 2 opposite depictions are superimposed: the **wounded Jesus** comforting his disciples after the resurrection, & the **triumphant Lord** who will judge the earth at the end of time & now rules the world with divine authority ("at God's right hand"). The doctrine of the 2 natures of Christ is an attempt to hold together these truths of faith.

### Thoughts from the Text

- 1) Conspiracy theories abound: Who really shot JFK? Were the moon landings real or staged? Did Elvis really die in 1977, or did he fake his death in order to get some privacy? Was 9/11 staged by the U.S. government? While they have always been around, the advent of an unfiltered internet has fostered a significant rise in them. Currently, about 66% of Americans believe that Jesus was resurrected; 20% believe the idea is basically a Conspiracy theory. What do you think? Among regular attenders to church 11% don't believe the resurrection is true. (Lifeway Research, Mar 2021) Whether it's the idea of Jesus only "swooning" on the cross then he was whisked away and recovered OR the body was taken and hidden and then stories were told that he was alive OR that the whole thing was a mass hallucination by many people – the conspiracy theories are believed (even among regular church attenders). The resurrection is considered a foundational element to faith and as such shapes all of our life. Is that really true for you? How does anyone see that in how you live? How do you incorporate it into how you live? How you approach death? What then is the purpose of life?
- 2) Some psychological reasons are suggested as to why people believe conspiracy theories:
  - a. A need for understanding and consistency (epistemic)

- b. A need for control (existential)
- c. A need to belong or feel special (social)
- d. Feeling anxious, disempowered, lacking control or lacking answers for large events/occurrences often predispose people to these ideas.
- e. COGNITIVE BIASES (biases in our thinking) often keep people believing false ideas, “My mind is made up, don’t confuse me with the facts.” The echo chamber effect. Esp. true when confronting our own personality traits/characteristics, thinking, etc. and how we impact others. Often difficult to look at ourselves. We want to keep believing we are right about ourselves; our self-perceptions are exactly as it really is; it’s always someone else’s fault, etc. even when the evidence is significant in the opposite direction. To admit anything is to admit weakness/being wrong in which case my identity and personal security are threatened and I feel vulnerable.

Where are you on the spectrum of being susceptible to believing conspiracy theories? In other words, how good are you at discerning what is truth? Judged by what? Are you open to examining your biases, perspectives, understandings, ways of thinking, etc?

- 3) Thomas is a “Truthseeker”. He doubts the “reports” of the resurrection, not necessarily the resurrection itself. In fact, Thomas only appears to need to see Jesus, not even touch him (though Jesus invites him to do so) in order to believe. What do you need in order to believe something? In a day and age of photographic/video manipulation, pictures are not always trustworthy. Neither are eyewitness accounts which are often considered among the weakest evidence in court compared to physical evidence. What allows you to believe a truth about something? What criteria and methods do you use to ensure you are getting a wider and more informed view of things? Notice that all of the disciples are doubters. Thomas is known to be that way yet the disciples didn’t believe the women either. No one believed it was true until they actually saw Jesus themselves. Again, what do you require in order to believe something? Or do you not really care, you can’t see how it impacts your daily life so why bother with what seems to just be an academic exercise? It’s just nice church conversation but has little bearing on my everyday life?

4) When Thomas trusts the Truth of Jesus' presence before him he is moved to a "confession" of who he sees Jesus to be. These 12 men and others then proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. It changed everything for them. John reminds us that trusting in Jesus' presence among us, living in that reality and "truth" brings us to live life at its most abundant, its most present, it is life in Jesus name (presence). What is needed for you to trust this more? Do you see Jesus' presence around your life? Do you know how to discern it? You can find it in the vulnerable and marginalized who have nowhere to hide. You can see it in acts of mercy, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, and love. You can experience it in giving/receiving forgiveness, experiences of internal growth/understanding of yourself, God and the world. You can have it strengthened as you reject conspiracy theories that help you believe and expect the worst in people, systems, structures and things. You can have it confirmed as you work for justice and advocacy for others. Have you seen it and what is your confession alongside of Thomas'?