

"Thomas and the Lord"

by

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As we heard from the scripture passage in John, the tomb is empty, the disciples are in disbelief and feeling scared....scared that they might be persecuted as the Lord was, maybe even scared that others might consider them to be responsible for removing Jesus' body from the tomb. Still, they were gathered together, bound by their devotion to the Lord. And so, because of their fear, we read that they have locked themselves in a house.

It is in this moment, that the Lord makes his first appearance to the disciples after his death. After entering the Lord showed them his hands and side, and after this, the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

It strikes me that the disciples needed some confirmation that it was indeed the Lord there among them. Despite all the miracles they had witnessed, and the foreknowledge they possessed about the Lord's intended return, imagine the disbelief that might have spontaneously arisen at the sight of Jesus, who they knew to be dead.

What better sign to convince the disciples than his wounds; Jesus' marks were proof of his identity. And they convinced the disciples, for they were overjoyed. I wonder what are the characteristics by which we convince others that it is really us. The physical put aside, we all have other marks. Some are us are known for our good tempers, or perhaps quite the opposite. Some of us are known by our sense of humor. Something makes people certain that it is us beyond all question, and no possible other. Christ showed them his hands and his side, and by that they knew that it was he. But what about Thomas?

Most of us here probably know Thomas by his character traits; we know Thomas as the doubting one. In fact, his name means twin, which might in fact allude to his dual nature - the one who believes at certain times, yet doubts at others.

Thomas was not with the disciples on that first evening, and after hearing of the return of Jesus from his fellow disciples - does not rejoice with his friends, as we

might expect, but rather responds with pessimism. "unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." Not only did Thomas want to see the very thing the disciples had witnessed without request, but he wanted to feel.

It is easy to be severe on Thomas - for not only does he refuse to accept the word of the other disciples, but he demands a sign. We might wonder, however, if we had been in his position - would we have argued as he argued? Was his request to examine Jesus' wounds with his hands wrong? Thomas may have just been incredibly honest - not wanting to be rushed into believing what he wanted to believe. Furthermore, for days on end, nothing further happened, and with that, no doubt, Thomas grew more and more confirmed in his rejection of the wild rumors.

As we know from the story, Jesus visits them again, a week later, this time Thomas *is* present. Jesus was always extremely perceptive while alive on earth; here, the Lord knows too exactly what it is that Thomas needs and wants in order to believe. He said to Thomas "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." This last line - stop doubting and believe - in its original Greek, the verb in this sentence is actually more closely translated as "to be; to show one's self" How curious - Just as Thomas is asking the Lord to show himself, the same could be said of the Lord to Thomas, each asking the other to show himself.

The Lord invites Thomas to touch his wounds, lay down his doubts. We never actually find out if Thomas needed the extra confirmation or not - in fact, whole traditions have grown out of this passage, some arguing that Thomas did not actually need to touch the Lord's wounds to believe - others arguing that he did. Regardless, Thomas is a believer. "My Lord and My God," he exclaims.

What is this story about - I think it is about faith and signs. When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed," we might get the feeling that it is rather lowly to ask for a sign, or feel the need for a sign - especially because faith generally carries with it a feeling of transcendence - faith transcends the need for physical evidence. This is what makes Thomas rather lowly - he couldn't believe the testimony of his friends and he needed the tangible evidence in his hands. What is interesting to note here, however, is that the Gospels are full of signs. The disciples, gathered together that first evening without Thomas, also needed a sign. They believed before Thomas, but only

because the Lord appeared before *them*, showing his wounds. Without these late critical appearances, or the Lord's appearance in the form of a human life at all, for that matter, the Christian Church would never have even gotten off of the ground. The invisible Divine, made visible in the form of Jesus, was most surely a miraculous sign. In the Swedenborgian understanding of the Lord, Jesus is Divine love and truth, brought into a dark world. Perhaps we could offer that Thomas, like many of us, was simply reaching out for evidence of that love and truth, looking to bring light and peace to his soul.

Signs help us in our faith journey. Signs of the Lord's continued love and care for creation are visible all around us - I think this evidence is displayed in the very beauty of the earth, and the love and joy that can come from relationships, among others. I think the Lord realizes that we need these kinds of signs, for the Lord knows each one of us intimately. As the psalmist says it, "O Lord, you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely."

Because of this, one of the beautiful part of this story for me is that it shows that the Lord is willing to meet us wherever we are - helping us to find the Divine, no matter what or where our faith is. We can see this in the Swedenborgian Doctrine of Appearances. This doctrine states that the Lord is ultimate Truth, with a capital T; we, as finite beings, cannot grasp the Truth in the way that God can. The Lord gives us truth only so much as we can take it - in other words, we never have within our grasp the full truth, only an appearance of it. As we grow, we continue to gain some truth, little by little - we might compare it walking up a steep San Francisco Hill - we take one small step at a time, but we can make progress. In this way, the Lord is always meeting us where we are - providing us with what we need.

The idea that the Lord is always with us, and meeting us where we are is wonderfully comforting, and yet we are challenged to deepen our faith, to create a new faith - moving from asking for signs to one of real internal acknowledgement of truth . The visible is called upon to lead us to the invisible. According to one Swedenborgian writer, Bruce, there are two kinds of evidence of the Divine - the external and internal. External evidence of the Divine may be found in tradition, miracles, and testimony of the senses - which is where we find Thomas in the first part of our story and perhaps some part of ourselves. The second kind of evidence of the Divine is internal - when we find truth bringing light and peace to the soul - here we find Thomas in the last part of our story.

In the life of the disciples, only one type of true faith has been possible, a belief that has arisen in the visible presence of the Lord; but with the new presence of Jesus in the Spirit, a new type of faith is called for. It is easy to be faithful when set in a sphere where there is much to encourage one. The Disciples had the honor of knowing the Lord personally, and seeing him rise. We do not have such an opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh.

However, each of us are able to touch a bit of truth. We may not see the same things, but the Lord meets us where we are. For some, it is the teachings of the Buddha, for others, just the marvel of creation itself. Now matter, how, each of us are given something to reach out to and feel. As we confirm our truths we can take the next step, but that cannot happen without that doubting Thomas part of ourselves.

This week, might give some time to reflect on this question of ourselves - what is the love and the truth that we are reaching out to touch in our lives? Where do we reach out and touch the Lord's love and truth in our daily lives?

Dearest Lord, May we be mindful of the truth you provide in our lives, that we would know how to take one step closer to you, that we may strengthen and deepen our faith in you. Amen.

Sources:
Anchor Bible Commentary
Bruce's Commentary on John