

This is my annual day of liturgical obligation to tell you that Thomas, who is so often remembered as *Doubting* Thomas, was really assigned an unfair nickname, and if we think of him only as he's popularly remembered in history, we're doing a disservice not only to him but also to ourselves as we try to understand this story.

Poor Thomas drew the short straw and was out making the Sheetz run when Jesus appeared to the rest of the disciples, inside the locked room where they had been hiding. When Thomas returns, they report to him that they have seen the Lord, but Thomas argues that until he sees and even touches Jesus' wounds, he will not believe. This response sounds kind of gross, but it's not an unreasonable reaction to their news. Remember that when the women told the rest of the disciples about the resurrection, the disciples thought the women had made it all up. Thomas' response is the same as everyone else's before they have seen—for themselves—evidence that Jesus is alive.

But the next week, when Jesus returns, Thomas is with the rest of the group, and he doesn't even take Jesus up on his offer of a medical examination before he identifies Jesus as "My Lord and my God!" Thomas turned out not to need quite as much convincing as he at first said he would, yet Jesus met Thomas where he was and offered him just what he said he needed to believe. Thomas is the one who gets the unflattering nickname, but he only asked for the same experience of the living Lord that Jesus' other followers all had. The women didn't figure out the empty tomb on their own; they needed the angels' explanation. The other disciples didn't take the women's word for it; Peter, and in John's gospel, the other beloved disciple ran to see the empty tomb for themselves, and *then* were amazed. The empty tomb wasn't enough for Mary, who despaired at Jesus' missing body until she encountered him herself, first mistaking him for the gardener. Thomas is the last of the inner circle to have some kind of encounter with the risen Lord, and as soon as he does, he believes.

So, perhaps Thomas did doubt, but he really didn't doubt Jesus. Thomas doubted the other disciples. But I don't think the question in this story is *Why did Thomas doubt the disciples when they said that they had seen the Lord?* I think the question we have to ask is, *Why wouldn't he?* Because the next thing that John tells us is that a week later, the disciples were still locked in the same house. They have seen the risen Jesus, but they don't do anything about it. They are still hiding from the crowds and authorities who put Jesus to death, even though they have seen their crucified friend alive again. Why are they still afraid? Why aren't

they out telling everyone that Jesus is alive? Why should Thomas believe that Jesus is alive if the disciples are still acting the same way they did when he was dead? How was Thomas supposed to know Jesus was risen if nobody acted like it? Or maybe a better question is *why did it matter* if Jesus was risen if nobody acted like it?

And that's the challenge for us. When Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" ...he's talking about all of us. After the ascension Jesus stopped showing up, physically, in person. Nobody since then has had the privilege that Mary, the disciples, and eventually Thomas had of seeing Jesus in the flesh. If we're going to believe in the crucified and risen Christ, it's going to have to be without seeing him in person. And if others are going to believe, it's going to have to be by seeing him reflected in those of us who claim to follow him.

In a meeting a couple weeks ago we were talking about how the fastest growing religious group in the country right now is the nones; not the n-u-n Catholic nuns, but the n-o-n-e nones who, when asked on surveys or the census to identify their religion, answer *none*. If we want to know why fewer and fewer people are calling themselves Christians, I think we have to ask how they are expected to begin a relationship with the living Christ if nobody around them has ever acted like Christ is alive. If there is no qualitative difference in our lives, we who claim not just to admire or acknowledge or appreciate Jesus, but to *worship* the crucified and risen Lord, if there is no difference between the way we live and the way someone who claims no religion lives, how are others supposed to come to believe? If we are like the disciples, trying to tell others we have seen the Lord, but showing no more compassion, mercy, or hunger for justice than the rest of the world around us, how is anyone to know? We know that Christ is alive because someone showed us the love of Jesus enlivening them. Now it's our turn to show that life and love to others.

The good news in this story is that Jesus didn't *give up* on Thomas, Jesus *showed up* for Thomas. Thomas couldn't tell from the other disciples' behavior that Jesus was alive, but Jesus persisted until Thomas was restored in relationship with him. Our God relentlessly pursues us with compassion, mercy, and forgiveness until we, too, can make that claim for ourselves, *My Lord and my God!* Our God won't give up on those around us, either. If we won't, if the church won't inspire other people to follow Christ, God will raise up new followers and new communities of faith that will. We are called to die and rise in Christ; may we be the ones who reflect that life to others, so that they, too, can truly say, "We have seen the Lord."