

Kristin Wickersham  
 “Redeeming Thomas”  
 A Sermon for St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church  
 Richmond Virginia  
 Second Sunday of Easter, Year A  
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*John 20:19-31*

*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.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”*

*But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.”*

*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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.”*

*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 Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Two years ago I was taking my daughter on a series of college tours up and down the East Coast. These tours are invariably led by current college students who field questions from anxious parents as the groups walk around the bucolic, green college campuses. During one of these tours, a father asked our tour guide, “What is the hardest thing you’ve had to deal with while being here?” Without missing a beat, the student tour guide replied, “You know FOMO. It’s real.”

I’ll admit to you that I had to lean over to my own teenager and ask, “What’d he say? What’s FOMO?” FOMO, as you may know already, is an acronym. It means Fear Of Missing Out. I think the student said it’s real because missing out happens a lot. You simply can’t be everywhere at once. Perhaps the one Sunday you missed at St. Andrew’s was the one where we broke into a special service of healing and everyone laid hands on a dear friend. I once missed a friend’s surprise wedding because I was too tired to go out to what had been described as just a Friday night get together.

On the night Jesus returned to his disciples, Thomas wasn’t there. He missed out. His beloved teacher had returned from the dead, walked through locked doors,

breathed the Holy Spirit on all the assembled disciples, and gifted them with his peace. Thomas missed all of it. He missed seeing the wounds in Jesus' hands and his side. He missed the rejoicing. He missed it all. And we've blamed him for not being there ever since. Where on earth was he, and what did he think he was doing not showing up for the disciples' meeting when he should have? What could he possibly have been doing that was more important? He clearly must have been skiving.

Then, to top it all off, when the disciples who had been there told Thomas what happened, he didn't believe them. Poor Thomas. I can relate. I'd have been ticked off, too. It's no surprise that he responded to their news by saying, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and thrust my finger into the mark of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will certainly not believe." I mean, it's a remarkable claim, isn't it? That God would raise someone bodily from the dead?

Why do we work so hard to shame Thomas?

I suspect it's because Thomas shows us something we don't want to confront in ourselves. In our judgment, we project our insecurities and shame onto Thomas. Once we've done that, we can blame Thomas for his insufficiency, while avoiding the same things in ourselves. Because, truly, for a Christian, what could be worse than doubting the resurrection? I think sometimes that we see Christianity as a kind of club. Those who believe are in the club. Those with doubts, who can't quite get there yet, those people aren't in the club. And we want to be in, not out. So we meet doubt with judgment, rejection, fear, and shame. This is what we inflict onto Thomas.

If being Christian means that we get to find extra reasons to be judgmental, I think we're doing it wrong. Instead of vilifying Thomas, our response to doubt should be to follow in the way of Jesus.

Jesus responds with love. Jesus comes back especially for the only disciple out of all of them who for some reason missed out and is now living with the consequences. And Thomas the Twin, whom we call doubting, got to experience something even more special than what had happened the previous week in the locked room where all the other disciples gathered. Jesus loved Thomas. Jesus tended to Thomas's frustrated doubt with the gift of peace, and a special invitation to intimacy with God. "Bring your finger here," he says, "and see my hands. And bring your hand and thrust it into my side." Look, see, and experience the living God. Imagine the unheard conversation between Jesus and Thomas. I don't think Jesus was chastising Thomas's doubt. I always imagine them talking about how difficult it is sometimes to live a human life. Think of Jesus with his hands outstretched and his robe raised up so the gash in his side could be revealed. Imagine Jesus leaning in to Thomas and quietly whispering to his dear friend about the pain of Good Friday and the darkness of the tomb. Finally imagine Jesus sharing with Thomas the good news and joy of his resurrection on the morning of the third day.

Have you ever wondered at the importance of Jesus's wounds? In all of God's power and might, Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. God, who raised Jesus, could have done anything at all with Jesus's body. Yet he came back to us with his wounds intact. God didn't take away the evidence of Jesus's earthly life. It was in his intimate contact with those wounds that Thomas recognized who Jesus is and what happened to him. His response was simple, but profound. "My Lord, and My God."

Imagine for a moment inviting one of your friends to intimately explore the worst thing that ever happened to you, and sharing how God helped you through it. It is in that space of human vulnerability where we can often find God. This story is not a story of judgment and disparagement of doubt. It is a love story between God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and us. It is a blessing for future generations of Christians. It's a call to share the experiences of our human lives with each other so that we can know God through them.

Christianity isn't meant to be a club exclusive to believers meeting behind locked doors. Instead let's follow in the way of Jesus. Let us be an open invitation to believers, doubters, and everyone in between to encounter the living God in the world.

Amen.