

"Unexpected Appearance"

Rev. Jeff Bacon

April 11, 2021

Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, as we open our hearts and minds to you, transform our doubts to faith. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

One night, a wife found her husband quietly standing over their newborn baby, who was sleeping in a brand-new crib. As she watched him looking down at their first baby, she saw on his face a wonderful mixture of deep emotions: delight, disbelief and doubt; amazement, enchantment and wonderment. Moved by her husband's touching appearance and the deep emotions it aroused in her, with eyes glistening, she slipped her arms around her husband and softly asked, "A penny for your thoughts?" "It's totally amazing!" he replied. "I just can't believe it. I can't believe how anybody can make a crib like this for only \$99."

Perhaps this dad will become known as Doubting Dad. Of all the people the risen Christ meets after his resurrection on Easter morning, none has left a more indelible mark on Christians than Doubting Thomas. He's the incredulous skeptic, the questioner who hides inside every Christian, resisting easy answers and wanting more proof.

On Easter Day, Jesus unexpectedly appeared to Mary Magdalene and all but one of the 11 disciples. One week later, they were still locked away in a room fearing for their lives. It must have been a difficult time: with rumours going around that some had seen the risen Christ; with the religious and political leaders still trying to quell the commotion of this confusing Passover; and with everyone questioning who Jesus really is. In this environment, the disciples responded by locking themselves away, hiding in fear. They may have seen and heard the risen Christ, but they didn't yet understand the mission that Jesus wanted them to embark upon. They were not yet living the reality of Easter. Only Thomas has an excuse.

Thomas has not yet seen the risen Christ with his own eyes and put his finger into the wound on Jesus' side. When the other disciples told Thomas, "We have

seen the Lord," Thomas reacted with disbelief. Thomas reacted the same way that the other disciples reacted on Easter morning when Mary told them, "I have seen the Lord." And Thomas' initial disbelief is the same as our disbelief; we have the same excuse that Thomas has. It's difficult to believe when you don't have all the facts. What should we believe, and what should we not believe?

In the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Thomas is mentioned, but only in the listing of the names of the disciples. However, in the gospel according to John, Thomas appears three times.

The first mention is back in John 11, after Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus has died. Lazarus died in Judea where they had just been; where they had just risked being stoned to death. Jesus tells them that they must go back to Lazarus; to walk in the light and not stumble in the dark. Only one disciple speaks up: "Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with Jesus.'" Going back to Judea with Jesus was to risk death. Thomas, even though he saw disaster ahead, was willing to risk his life to follow Jesus back to the grave of their friend Lazarus. Wow, not much doubt here.

The second mention of Thomas is in John 14; verses that we often read at funerals. Jesus is speaking to the disciples and begins, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me." Jesus is foretelling his death and resurrection and he tells them that they know where he is going. But "Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life.'" This sounds like Jesus responding to honest, thoughtful, faithful Thomas. Not much doubt here either.

Which brings us to John 20 and our reading today. Thomas, also called Didymus, which is Greek for twin, has been hearing from the other disciples for a whole week about their meeting with Jesus on Easter Sunday. It's hard to believe and Thomas must be getting frustrated. Then, Jesus unexpectedly appears in their locked room and tells Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believe." Thomas doesn't touch Jesus, but knowing that it's the risen Christ speaking to him, he

exclaims, "My Lord and my God." Thomas is far from doubting; with the same evidence as the others, Thomas is the first one to see God fully revealed in the risen Christ. Thomas sees and he believes. But Jesus recognizes the importance of faith and he tells everyone, including us, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The apostle John describes a Pentecost-like conveyance of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Jesus breathed on them and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The verb used for "breathed" occurs only here in the entire New Testament. But it's used in the Old Testament when God breathed the breath of life into the first humans in Genesis. And it's used in Ezekiel when God breathed life into the valley of dry bones, and it's used in the Wisdom of Solomon where God "breathed a living spirit into them." God is breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples; the breath of life, in what's like the beginning of a new Creation. And then Jesus commissions them to continue the work that God sent Jesus to do in the world.

Jesus walks through a closed, locked door to get to Thomas. It's not Thomas who seeks out Jesus for answers. Jesus is determined to reach Thomas and to provide what Thomas needs to believe. In our most profound and private questioning, it's Jesus who comes seeking us, through the locked doors we have closed around us because of personal doubt, hurt, hardships and fear. Jesus comes, offering love and comfort, offering himself over and over again where our faith is most fragile, when we need to see and to hear in order that we may believe.

Last Tuesday morning there was an article in *The Globe and Mail* by Cathy Bohlken called *Believing in Life After Death*. Cathy and her boyfriend Dave were interested in reports and documentaries about life after death, but she says, "Deep within my heart, I believed that once we died, that was it. I never believed in the possibility of life after death." Cathy was scientifically trained as a respiratory therapist. In the midst of Cathy and Dave making plans for the future, one week before Christmas, Dave died by suicide. Cathy grieved for months. Perhaps as a reaction to her grief, Cathy became mesmerized by the thought that a psychic

medium might be able to connect her with Dave. Cathy decided to visit Patricia. Patricia is a well-known psychic in Calgary, where Cathy lives, who has a good record of helping law enforcement agencies locate missing and murdered persons. Cathy was very careful not to tell Patricia anything about Dave – Patricia would either know things or she wouldn't.

Patricia began by identifying spirits that had entered the room with Cathy. Patricia described one of her grandfathers perfectly, but she said that her grandfather was talking about someone else who was there who was missing the tip of a finger. Cathy began to doubt, but later discovered that her other grandfather, who died when she was a baby, had lost the tips of two fingers in a lawnmower accident. This was one of 50 validations that Patricia could not have possibly known about her life.

Patricia sensed that there was somebody else in the room, but the spirit was "wispy," unlike her grandfather who was strongly present. Patricia asked if someone had died recently. Patricia said that "In the first year, it's darn near impossible to reach them, but I will try because he is here." Patricia told Cathy stories about her and Dave for almost an hour, telling her things that Patricia could not possibly have known. Patricia explained that "if you even think of them, it's ... like picking up the phone or having him right in front of you." We feel the energy of spirits differently and Cathy began to feel a tingling sensation on the right side of her head as if her hair was standing on edge. Cathy concludes that "The experience has brought me comfort. The peace that I feel has assured me that our journey does not end once we pass from this life ... and I am constantly being caressed by the other side."

Cathy believes that she experiences the presence of Dave. Thomas experienced the presence of the risen Christ and he believed. Many people saw the risen Christ and believed. In faith, we can experience the presence of the risen Christ too. It might be in tingles or tears, or in a warm feeling or unusual insight. Through faith, we get glimpses of the divine every day, in lots of ways, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus rose from the dead to lead us and inspire us in this life and the next. Thanks be to God. Amen.