

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
9 July 2023

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
6th Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Thomas”

Sixth sermon in the summer series, “Seeing Ourselves in the Twelve”

John 11:7-16, John 14:1-7, John 20:24-29

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

As I kid, I loved the game *Guess Who?* In this game each player has a board, and you and the other player have the same cards flipped up on your board – pictures of all sorts of different kinds of people with different physical features. And each of you draw a card that also matches one of these cards on your boards, and the goal is to guess who is on your opponent’s card before they guess who is on yours. The catch? You can only ask YES or NO questions, such as “*Does your person wear glasses?*” If the answer is no, you then flip down all the people on your board with glasses, leaving the remaining possibilities open. If the answer is yes, you flip down all the people without glasses.

The game continues like this back and forth – *Does your person have red hair? Is your person wearing a hat? Does your person have facial hair?* As you gradually eliminate people based on features, you

eventually narrow down to one. The first player to guess their opponent’s mystery character correctly, wins!

It's such a simple game, really...just a race to figure out someone’s identity the fastest. There is kind of a strategy to it once you play it long enough. You figure out which questions help you knock down more people first, expediting your journey to knowing WHO your mystery person is.

If the disciples were on their own “Guess Who?” board, the sure give away question to figure who today’s disciple would be: “*Does your person doubt?*” And if the answer was YES, then click, click, click...all the other disciples would be flipped down – and you would win the game. It’s Thomas! Ding ding ding!

But just like how the game *Guess Who?* only focuses on surface level characteristics, when we reduce Thomas to

simply a “doubter”, we skip over the full depth of who he was. The overall message I get from Thomas’ life is *Devotion*, not Doubt.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all mention Thomas as present in the list of the twelve disciples, but give no specific “call story” for him. We don’t know where he is from or who he is related to or what he does for a living. Although some say he might have been a fisherman since John’s gospel has him out on the water in the fishing at the end of his gospel. But we don’t really know for sure.

John’s gospel is also the one that labels him as “Thomas, also called the Twin.” Interestingly – we really don’t know Thomas’ real name because in Hebrew and Aramaic the word for Thomas is *Ta’om* or *Te’oma* – which simply means twin. And the other word that’s listed as a potential name/descriptor is *Didymus*, which is simply the Greek word for twin. So when you see in Scripture, “*Thomas, who was also called Didymus,*” (John 20:24), you can essentially translate that as “*Twin who was also called Twin.*” Weird, huh? Thomas’ identity is somewhat of a mystery in that way. More on

Thomas’ “twin” later, for now we’ll start with Thomas.

We get the most information about Thomas from these three exchanges he has with Jesus that are recorded in John’s gospel. And what stands out to me is that **among Jesus’ followers, Thomas is a leader.** Thomas is devoted, beyond a shadow of a doubt.

First, as we see in John 11, Thomas Faces Fear With Courage (John 11:7-16). Say that with me, “**Thomas Faces Fear with Courage.**”

It’s a critical moment in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus learns that his friend Lazarus has died and he tells his disciples they need to head to Judea. The disciples don’t know what Jesus’ knows at this point. They don’t know what has happened to Lazarus. But what they DO know is that going to Judea is the exact opposite direction they should be going. They are afraid – for their leader, Jesus, and also for themselves. “*Judea? Are you kidding? You almost got stoned to death in Jerusalem a few days ago; we are not going anywhere near there right now.*”

So Jesus explains to them why they must go, because Lazarus

has ‘fallen asleep’ and Jesus needs to ‘wake him up.’ And the disciples are like, *“Yeah, still no. Let him wake up on his own. What do we look like? His personal alarm clock? We’re not risking our lives for that!”*

Jesus sighs, and says, *“I guess I have to spell everything out for you don’t I?”* (To which I want to reply along with every other disciples of all time – yes, Jesus, you do! Please spell it out for us...always!) I wish we did get things spelled out for us from Jesus. But it’s a rare occasion that happens. But this time – it does. Jesus says: *“Lazarus is dead. We must go...”*

And with that, Thomas is IN. He has no doubt or hesitation. Just devotion. And he rallies the others and says, *“Come on guys, Let us go so that we may die with him.”* How brave and courageous!

Thomas steps up in this moment to say, in the words of Ruth: *“Where you go, I will go.”* Thomas may not understand everything that Jesus is saying, but he understands that any place near Jerusalem is a dangerous place AND YET if Jesus says they must walk back into danger and potential death in order to heal and bring life –

then he’s gonna go too. Thomas understands that following Jesus means following Jesus – both “in the green pastures and by the still waters” AND “through the valley of the shadow of death,” (Psalm 23). He knows that the Gospel calls us not to safe places, but sacred ones. The Gospel calls us not to comfort but to courage. The Gospel calls us to have faith, even in the midst of our fear.

Thomas says, *“if THIS is where Jesus is leading, it’s where we must go.”*

Thomas teaches us that the most important thing is not where Jesus is leading us but the fact he IS leading us and wants us to stay near. We must trust that where we are, God is...even when it’s a super hard, super scary, super crazy and chaotic place to be.

Often when things get really hard, our first instinct is to think that God has abandoned us or that God is not with us. But what if the opposite is true? What if Jesus is the one who is showing us that the only way out is through? That sometimes we cannot avoid situations of suffering, but must endure them. And remember now, fear is a very natural, normal human

emotion. Clearly it is because think of how many times Jesus or some angel on his behalf is saying, *“Do not fear! Do not be afraid!”* Fear is normal. The question is – do we let our fear freeze us and keep us from faithfully following with the next step...or do we face our fear with courage. The root of the word *courage* is *cor* – the Latin word for heart. What does it mean to follow Jesus with all of our *heart*, all of our emotions – fear included, and to say *“Here am I...and I will follow. I am afraid, but I will go because I know you are with me.”*

It takes tremendous heart-strength, tremendous courage to walk through pain and even into pain...to endure seasons of suffering that seem to be never ending – whether physical, spiritual, mental, or existential.

Have you considered that in your most difficult times – when fear seems most pervasive, when doubt and despair live right on the surface – that perhaps God is not apart from you or far away from you but in fact, God is with you and guiding you through that pain? Like the *Footprints in the Sand*¹

poem, that yes is cliché, but that also has truth...that in our hardest times God might be carrying us – not just walking next to us or ahead of us. That, as the Psalmist voices in Psalm 139, there is truth in the words: *“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”* Anywhere I go, God is. And there is nowhere I can go, where God is not.

We gain strength from Thomas’ brave example as he Faces Fear with Courage. To be a follower of Christ, we must face our fear with courage too, with heart.

I don’t know your story right now, but I’m willing to guess that every single one of us is facing something that has us a bit afraid, a bit uncertain, or downright scared to death. From the global level of the fear the people of Ukraine face on a daily basis as they hide in bomb shelters – to the more personal level of the fear you may face just getting up the courage to make a tough phone call to repair a relationship OR the fear you have daily with depression

¹ Poem accessed on 9 July 2023 at <https://www.onlythebible.com/Poems/Footprints-in-the-Sand-Poem.html>.

or anxiety OR the fear you have sending your kids to school wondering if they'll be safe OR the fear you carry every day hoping you're good enough for your boss and don't get fired OR or the monthly fear of where the money is going to come from to pay your bills OR even perhaps an existential fear of what will happen to you after you die or who will be around you and caring for you when you die.

Life is full of fear. As people of faith, we follow Thomas' lead. We follow Jesus and we face fear with courage. We take the next step into whatever situation we are in, trusting that God is one step ahead of us already. We walk into that hospice room to hold our loved ones hand. We send a text to our estranged sibling. We apply for that job we think we aren't good enough to get. We have a tough conversation with someone who we hear making a racist comment. We ask someone to point out our own faults or oversights that we may not be seeing in ourselves so that we can grow. We do the Thing we think we could never do – and quite frankly don't want to do – because God is with us. We face fear with courage.

The **second** encounter we have of Thomas and Jesus comes in John 14. And here, Thomas teaches us to Seek Truth Through Curiosity (John 14:1-7). Say that with me: **“Thomas Seeks Truth through Curiosity.”**

In this passage Jesus is preparing for his death, and he's saying goodbye to his friends. He's trying to give them comfort even as he explains where he is going and that one day, they will be with him again. But of course, they don't get it. A few different disciples ask Jesus questions in John 14, which is known as “the Farewell Discourse,” so Thomas isn't unique in asking a question. But perhaps what is unique is how honest and frank he is.

Jesus has just said, quite confidently I might add, *“And YOU KNOW the way to where I am going.”* And Thomas, God love him, throws up a T (Time Out) and says, *“Um, no we don't. We don't know where you are going, how could we? So please – do tell – how can we know the way?”*

I love this exchange for many reasons – but mostly because Thomas doesn't pretend to know what he doesn't know.

How many of us would have heard Jesus say this and would have thought to ourselves “I don’t know the way but I guess I’m supposed to know the way or I guess I’ll figure out the way” OR we’d look around at others and see that their not raising their hand figure that Jesus must have handed out a map earlier to where he was going while we were in the restroom and we’ll just have to get a copy later, right? We assume that the issue is on us...it’s about our NOT-KNOWING and WE must have missed something or be incompetent or not as astute as others, instead of assuming that maybe the other person just assumed we knew something we didn’t or just simply forgot to tell us an important detail. It never hurts to ask a question. Or as they say, “the only stupid question is the one you don’t ask.”

Questions do not reveal ignorance. Questions reveal curiosity and a genuine seeking of truth and understanding. Jesus himself asks 307 questions in his ministry!

In our own lives, how much clearer would our relationships be if we would merely speak up and ask, with curiosity, for

someone to say more about what they mean. To explain to us what they are saying in a different way. Or to ask them if they could give us an example of what they are saying or clarify for us.

It's okay to be curious. And when it comes to faith and church – curiosity is encouraged! Nobody knows everything about God, Jesus, church, theology, sin, salvation, death, life, atonement, hope, miracles, healings, parables, Leviticus, you name it! You are not the only one who does NOT know something, I guarantee it. So many of y’all come to my office and ask me questions of faith – which I love, by the way – mostly because I usually have the same questions...but in asking, many of you think you are the only ones. Or that something is wrong with you or missing in you that you can’t grasp a concept or that you can’t feel or see or experience God in a certain way that other people seem to be.

I used to really worry about this myself too. I’d look around and it seemed like everyone else had “more faith” than me or that they understood something I didn’t. But there is no such thing as *more* faith or *less* faith.

Faith is just faith. And so often what faith means is believing or trusting or hoping even though you don't know...even though you don't understand...even though there are no concrete, clear answers today. It's maddening, I know. But this is where Thomas can be our teacher.

He has no shame or doubt in asking his question to Jesus. He just asks. He is humble in admitting he does not know, and he is self-confident in asking for clarification – he believes he is worthy of knowing, or at least of gaining greater understanding. And it's in Jesus' answer to Thomas that we get one of the greatest truths of our faith – that it is in the Way Jesus lives his life, it is in the Truth that he speaks, it is in his Life example that we come to know the nature of God and the Divine.

What if Thomas had kept his mouth shut in that moment? What if we didn't have that verse from Jesus that explains the purpose of his life, and thus our lives?

In an age where the answers to so many of our questions are at the tip of our fingers through a simple google search; we have

to be reminded that seeking Truth in our faith is not like doing a google search for a recipe or how-to video. To seek Truth is to cultivate curiosity. Curiosity always expands faith, and to be honest, sometimes, sometimes, certainty can limit it.

The more we are curious about one another and our faith, and other faiths, the more we will learn about God because the more glimpses of God we will get through all the people we talk to and learn from and with. The *imago dei* isn't just in us – it's in ALL of us. And the more questions we ask and explore, the more of God we come to know.

I know that it can be scary to ask questions about our Faith, because if one thing is maybe not what we thought it was – then everything can start to unravel – like pulling a thread in a nicely woven sweater. If we keep pulling, the sweater will unravel – and what will we do without the sweater? But the thing is – Faith in God is not about a perfectly woven sweater that looks really cute and has no loopholes or tears. Faith in God is just holding on to the yarn, trusting that it might take different shapes throughout our life, serving different

purposes...but it's keeping ahold of the yarn (the divine) that matters most...not what we weave it into. If it feels like your faith is unraveling, I know it's scary, but take a deep breath. It's okay. You still have the yarn...even if it's balled up on the floor under your bed. Waiting for your curiosity to peak, waiting for you to pick it up again and ask – I wonder what I can knit with this? What something new God will co-create with me?

As comfy as your old sweater might have been, and as challenging as it is to knit something new, when we seek greater truth and understanding – it's inevitable that we will face, more deeply, all that we do not know. What I love about Thomas is that he holds on to what he does know about Jesus – that Jesus will listen to him and be present to him – even as he asks Jesus about what he does not know.

It's like the words from the Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, written in his letter to Franz Xaver Kappus, a 19-year-old officer cadet and aspiring poet, on July 16, 1903:

“Be patient towards all that is unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms, like books written in a foreign tongue. Do not now strive to uncover answers: [maybe] they cannot be given you because you have not been able to live them. And what matters is...to Live the questions...Perhaps then you will gradually, without noticing it, live your way into the answer, one distant day in the future.”²

And this is exactly what happens to Thomas; he lives his way into an answer just days later after Jesus has died and risen again. Which leads to our **third point** today: Thomas Finds Faith in Personal Experience in John 20. Say that with me, “**Thomas Finds Faith in Personal Experience**” (John 20:24-29).

The disciples were huddled in fear after Jesus died (reminder again that fear is always with us...so we have to figure out how to live with it more so than try to figure out how to get rid of it!). And Jesus appears to the disciples, but of course we all

² Quote available many places; this version accessed on July 9, 2023 at <https://imperfectionistblog.com/rainer-maria-rilke-on-loving-the-questions>.

know the story – Thomas wasn't there; he was out and about, who knows, perhaps facing his fear with courage by not staying huddled in the room! Whatever the reason – he misses the appearance of the Risen Christ and when his friends tell him about it he says, *“I need to see for myself in order to believe for myself.”*

This is the story that gets Thomas the nickname “Doubting Thomas” – which is such a shame. Because he actually never doubts anything. He just states what he needs spiritually: I need to have my own personal experience with Jesus to believe. I feel like this passage really speaks to the power of personal testimony and of our own personal experiences with the Divine as being crucial in shaping what we believe about God and how we share with others about God. You can trust *your* experiences to reveal truth.

And – we are most likely to share with others about the power of God or the love of God in our lives, when we have a personal story we can share about it. Our experiences of God and faith matter.

And in the case of Thomas, patience pays off. He states what he needs, to see Jesus for himself – and guess what? – Jesus comes a second time and gives Thomas what he needs. He appears to him and invites him to touch his wounds, which is a most vulnerable invitation.

I don't think this passage is about doubt as much as it is about knowing what you need for belief and for belonging, and trusting that God will provide that...even if it takes a while...and even if it looks way different than how you thought it might look.

In my own deepest depths of searching for God and holding all kinds of doubts about faith and life, I actually came to experience God's ever-present love through my pastor who simply listened to all my questions and validated them even as he couldn't answer most of them. He saw me, he heard me, and shared his own wounds and wonderings with me and eventually I figured out – that as I was pleading and praying to God to see me and hear me – God was putting someone right in front of me who was doing just that – who was saying – *“I am here, I am present, you are not alone; Faith is a journey,*

not a certainty.” It took me a while to figure this out, but I think it’s akin to Jesus holding out his wounds to Thomas and saying, “*Here I am; touch me; see, feel, believe. I am here.*”

Part of Finding Faith in our Personal Experience is trusting that God knows what we need and will give us that. We’ve seen this over the course of the summer as we listen to the stories of Calvary members in the *I am Calvary* forums. And isn’t it true that as we listen to other people’s stories, we can actually learn things about our own story by listening to theirs? Just how we are trying to *See Ourselves in the Twelve*, we can see *ourselves – and therefore glimpses of God – in the Stories of our Fellow Disciples* too.

And I love how Thomas’ personal experience about coming to deeper belief in Jesus is by seeing Jesus’ wounds, his vulnerabilities, not by having some great theological truth explained. It’s simply through seeing that Jesus is human, just like them.

As Jesus extends his wounds to his disciples and says “*See, it’s*

me” – I wonder, what would happen in our community if we did the same?

What would it look like to tell each other the real truth of what’s going on in our lives? Because so often it is in our wounds (the stuff going on beneath the surface) that God is at work as our salve, our healing, saving balm.

As researcher/social scientist Brené Brown says, “*Staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we want to experience connection.*”

Faith is ultimately about connection – deeper connection with God, with one another and with ourselves.

In a saying somewhat attributed to Mother Theresa, this truth is penned: “*I looked for God, and could not find him; I looked for my soul, and could not find it; I looked for my brother, and [there, in him] found all three.*”³

As we share with others, and in caring for others – we not only see them, we see the face of

³ Accessed on July 9, 2023 at <https://www.catholicireland.net/saintoftheday/the-twin-st-thomas-the-apostle/>.

God and we come to see ourselves with greater clarity.

And here's the amazing thing we learn from Thomas – what's accessible to him is accessible to us all. The personal experience he has that leads him to greater belief is not with the physical man of Jesus from Nazareth that he had followed for 3 years, but rather with the mystical and mysterious Risen Christ – whose face and wounds we see all around us – in ourselves and one another.

In all three of these stories that John tells, as Thomas Faces Fear with Courage, as he Seeks Truth through Curiosity, and as he Finds Faith in Personal Experience – there is an overriding theme: Thomas wants to be near Jesus. Thomas' courage is about being with Jesus no matter where the road leads. Thomas' question is about finding out where Jesus is going, ensuring he understands so he can follow. And Thomas' insistence on seeing Jesus for himself is about wanting to have a personal experience of nearness with Jesus and not just rely on the experience of others.

It takes effort and work and patience and a lot of seeking to have a personal relationship

with God. To see God in the world around us. To experience Christ in creation and cosmos, and in our siblings all around us. It doesn't just happen; it requires devotion.

This is what Thomas teaches us and shows us – in a very authentic, forthright, and honest way. Thomas is all in. He doesn't want to miss out. He is not sleep walking his way through life. He is present and doesn't want a proxy. He is brave and bold as he seeks belonging.

And as Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and My God!” he reveals to us the deepest truth of all – that Jesus is the One he follows AND Jesus is God in the flesh. So close to us as human, yet divine as well.

Which leads to a final fun thought.

As scholars discovered writings from the 2nd and 3rd centuries, *The Acts of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Thomas* they learned that in a different, early strand of Christian thinking, it was believed that Thomas was Jesus' twin. More so spiritually, than literally. And that, as I said earlier, that maybe Thomas wasn't meant to have a real

name after all – remember I said he was “the Twin who was the Twin” because he was here to reveal to us the we are in fact the Twin. We are the twin of Christ. You and me.

Writing about the *Gospel of Thomas*, scholar Elaine Pagels writes,

“In *The Gospel of Thomas* Jesus says, ‘If those who lead you say to you, ‘look, the Kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds will get there first. If they say ‘it’s in the ocean,’ then the fish will get there first. But the Kingdom of God is within you and outside of you. Once you come to know yourselves, you will become known. And you will know that it is you who are the children of the living father.’”

She continues,

“As you read the Gospel of Thomas, what you’re meant to discover, is that you and Jesus at a deep level are identical twins...you are the child of God just as he is...In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus does not take the role of authority and teacher....[but rather teaches] that you must go in a sort of a spiritual quest of your own to

discover who you are, and to discover really that you are the child of God just like Jesus.”⁴

Maybe the greatest lesson of all from Thomas the Twin – the disciple who led with courage, curiosity, honesty, authenticity, and vulnerability – is that the more we know ourselves, and seek to know one another – the closer we get to knowing God.

Nothing about THAT sounds like doubt to me; it sounds like deep devotion – and – discovery.

May we all look deeply within ourselves and each other, until we, too, exclaim: “*My Lord, and My God!*”

Amen.

⁴ Elaine H. Pagels, “The Gospel of Thomas,” *Frontline PBS.org* (April 1998), accessed on July 9, 2023

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/thomas.html>.