



Thomas' Resurgence

John 20:19-31

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Good morning, and Happy Easter!

I know, today is not Easter Sunday, but Easter is not a celebration that can be contained in one day. It is, indeed, a season-long celebration, during which we remember the resurrection of the Lord and his resurrected encounters. Each week during this Easter season we are looking at how Christ's resurrected presence gives new life to those who encounter him. I'm calling this series, *Resurgence*, as we consider how Jesus' resurrection offers resurgent life.

Resurgence, as defined by Merriam Webster, is "a rising *again* into life, activity, or prominence." The Cambridge English Dictionary defines it as, "an increase in activity or interest in a particular subject or idea which had been forgotten for some time." Resurgence is not the creation of life – it is the return of life to a person or thing that once had life, but had lost it. It is the return of interest where interest had gone lacking.

For example, last Sunday, we studied the resurrection story. The resurrection is in and of itself a story of resurgence. Jesus was alive, was crucified, died, and buried ... and on the third day, he had a resurgence of life – he came back to life after death. Then Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene. Mary once had faith in Jesus as the Son of God, as the miracle worker who had some time ago healed her and given her life. But she showed up at the tomb on Easter morning with little faith – weeping in brokenness when she found the tomb empty, thinking Jesus' body had been stolen. But when Jesus spoke her name, Mary Magdalene had a resurgence of faith, and an increase in interest in Jesus, which led her to go forth from the garden to preach the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

This model of resurgence becomes the norm for those who encounter the resurrected Jesus in the season of Easter. People who had lost faith, who had lost interest, who were broken and indeed suffering at the news of Jesus' death, they find new life – a resurgence of life – in the presence of the risen Lord. Each week, we're going to use these stories to consider how we can experience our own resurgence in the good news of Christ's resurrection.

Admittedly, this morning's scripture is one of my favorite in all of the Biblical text. Unsurprisingly, I'm just that egotistical. There are few Biblical passages that mean more to me, and that better define my faith, than the story of Thomas (my namesake).

You have to understand, there's some odd connections between Thomas and me. First off, within the Biblical text, we read that Thomas means *the twin*. I'm not a twin, but as many of you know, I have twins. Understand, my affinity for Thomas long predates Asher and Nathan, it long predates my desire to even have children. But it's strangely fitting that the one whose name means *the twin* (me, Thomas) helped bring into the world twins.

But more than just pseudo-semantic connections, Thomas is my spirit animal. For all the critique we give Thomas for not taking at face value the presence of Jesus in the midst of the disciples, Thomas is quite an intelligent disciple. To fully understand Thomas' wisdom, we have to back up a few chapters.

We don't receive a lot of information about Thomas in the Biblical text. There are few stories that even include his name. But, if we back up to John 11, we find Thomas is quoted in the text.

The story in Chapter 11 is about Lazarus, who dies and is resurrected by Jesus. As the text begins in verse 1, we're told that Lazarus lived in Bethany, which is a village just outside of Jerusalem. Jesus and the disciples receive news that Lazarus has died. Some of the disciples ponder, trying to be hopeful, saying, "If he is sleeping, he will be alright." Jesus responds and confirms the news they had received, "Lazarus is *dead*." Jesus continues, "Let us go to him."

Understand, by this time in Jesus' 3-year ministry, it's clear the Jewish authorities, and the Roman government, are none-to-pleased with Jesus' presence. There have already been some contentious encounters between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. For Jesus to head into Bethany, with its proximity to the Temple in Jerusalem, is like the metaphorical entrance into the hornet's nest. It's not the safest place for Jesus to go. Yet, it is the very place Jesus says they must go.

Immediately following Jesus' imperative to depart, we come across John 11, verse 16, which reads, "Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'"

This is a bit confusing. This is, as my English teacher would have named, an example of an unclear pronoun reference. Who is the "him?" Does Thomas mean, "Let us go, that we may die with Lazarus?" If so, that begs the question, why would visiting Bethany lead them to die like Lazarus, who we are told died due to illness? Is there a viral outbreak in Bethany that we don't know about?

Or, is Thomas saying, "Let us go, that we may die with Jesus?" If so, we are right to ponder, does Thomas know that Jesus' arrival in Bethany, with its proximity to Jerusalem, will ultimately lead to Jesus' death? ... This seems the more likely scenario, and it fits the story line to come. Surprisingly, Thomas indicates an understanding that going to Bethany was sure to bring about Jesus' death. It's an odd thing to name, because the disciples have failed up to this point to grasp Jesus' depiction of the passion to come, but Thomas is right to name this fear.

See, for all the criticism Thomas receives for being a *doubter* when the resurrected Jesus appears in the midst of the disciples, it seems he is the one who best understood what would happen when Jesus arrived in the Holy City. Paul Simpson Duke, a Baptist Pastor in Ann Arbor, Michigan, states, "[Thomas] is by no means a person of unsteady conviction or of a predisposition to doubt, but someone who is willing to face and to name the evident difficult facts."ⁱ When we look back to John 11, what we find is that Thomas is not a doubter per say, but a *realist*. He, unlike the other disciples, understands the reality of the situation, and calls their attention to the truth of what will happen should they go with Jesus.

If this group of disciples stands by Jesus, if they go into the metaphorical hornet's nest with him, they too could be hung up to die next to him.

If we can detach the *doubting* adjective, and instead give Thomas the benefit of the doubt, what we find is that Thomas is just a realist who believed in what reason says must be true.

Follow the narrative as we jump back to today's text in John 20 ... by the time Jesus arrives in the room with the disciples, we can only expect that Mary Magdalene has already announced to them that Jesus was risen. Surely everyone in that room has heard the news that Jesus had come back to life. As soon as Mary had departed the garden, we're told she went and made sure the disciples knew the good news.

Verses 19 to 25 tell us that the first time Jesus showed up in the room, Thomas was not there. Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed them his wounds, offering confirmation that indeed, he was risen. The disciples then went and told Thomas, "We have seen the Lord."

So now, Mary has proclaimed it, the disciples – excluding Thomas – have confirmed it. And yet Thomas still says, "I will believe when I put my finger in the wounds."

See, Thomas is a realist who "will not give himself over to someone else's religious enthusiasm. He will not surrender his mind to secondhand news."ⁱⁱ He doesn't want Mary's account, he doesn't want the stories of the other disciples, Thomas wants to know for himself.

Like I said, Thomas is my spirit animal. I don't know about you, but I get this kind of skepticism. I share this kind of cynicism. I get this unwillingness to just accept that someone's else's truth as reality. This is especially true in times when I'm hurting, and broken, and unsure ... those times when I'm doubting what's real and what's fiction ... when I'm struggling with what's promised and what's actual. This is anxiety causing – to know one truth, to believe in one reality, to have conviction regarding what is fact and what is fiction ... and to have someone else saying to you, "You're wrong." This is infuriating, to have anyone, especially a close friend, claiming that your truth, your reality, your conviction, no matter how scientifically proven, is wrong.

I mean, really ... How does one come back from the dead? What Mary and the others are saying is physically impossible. Thomas was not just a realist, he was a *stubborn* realist (my favorite kind).

For a realist, no verbal confirmation was going to be enough to break Thomas' fear. In truth, what we find, is that no visual confirmation was going to be enough either. Thomas didn't want to hear it, and he didn't want to see it, he wanted to feel it with his own hands.

A second time the disciples were gathered in the house, this time Thomas was with them. Jesus again appears to them and speaks, "Peace be with you."

Into the presence of fear and disbelief, Jesus shows up and provides for the disciples what no other person could possibly provide – a presence of peace.

Jesus seems to offer little pause before turning and looking directly at Thomas. He knew Thomas to be a realist – to doubt what the others had told him – to be skeptical of what he had not been able to prove for himself. And Jesus addresses him directly, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

Like Mary Magdalene, who stood before Jesus thinking him to be the gardener, unsure of the reality of the presence of the resurrected Lord, Thomas stood in the presence of the risen Christ, unsure of the truth that stood just feet away. His hypothesis was being confirmed – if I can but see and touch the truth, I will have belief. Thomas thought that death was the final truth. But there, in his midst, Jesus’ wounds make it clear to him that the final truth is life.

Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” He experiences resurgent faith and belief in Christ not just as Lord, or as teacher, or as rabbi, or as friend, but in his resurgence of faith, Thomas exclaims Christ as the living God. He wouldn’t stand for a vision of the truth, he didn’t want a metaphorical resurrection, he wanted the beaten, bloodied, and crucified one to be physically present, standing and filled with life. In the reframing of his reality, Thomas is filled with new life, with a new hope, and with a new truth.

Christ, turning from this jubilant proclamation, says – as much to us as to the disciples – “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Friends, I don’t know if you share a passion for Thomas in the way I do, but I think many of us share the pain of having our reality reframed. It’s not an easy process to give up on once-held beliefs. We find it difficult to have age-old truths corrected. We find it hard to be told that our historical understanding is incorrect. We struggle when even scientific revelations are found to be unexplainable. We want concrete realities – we want justification for maintaining the status quo – we want to proclaim our truth without being told we are wrong.

But this is not life as Jesus, resurrected and risen, allows. Jesus enters in to the most barricaded of rooms, without knocking or even using the door, to proclaim to us that in the resurrection, our stubborn realities are rewritten. Our doubt and fear and overcome. Our attempt to lock ourselves away, and keep others out, is corrected. In the resurrection of Jesus, we find a resurgence of life that opens us up to new possibilities, and to the promise that Christ is risen – that death and destruction do not have the final say – that power and privilege will not win – that hate and exclusion will not remain.

May we be encountered by the risen Lord, that we might have resurgent faith in God’s all-redeeming love, to have our broken realities filled with new life. For the glory of God, we profess and proclaim, my Lord and my God! Christ is risen – Christ is risen indeed!

ⁱ Paul Simpson Duke. *Feasting on the Gospels: John*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Duke.