

Sermon Title: What Do We Have in Common?

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Text: Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI

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The Gospel of Judas is attracting quite a bit of attention these days. And while I'll admit that my curiosity is piqued by such things, I've not found myself overwhelmed by the reports I've read. This is neither the first, nor I suspect, the last of such discoveries. Some of you are probably old enough to remember the unearthing of the Nag Hammadi library, or the Dead Sea scrolls. The simple truth is that one of the peculiar characteristics of that little corner of the world we call the Holy Land is that old stuff that has been squirreled away in caves has a way of enduring, and then finding their way back into the light of day.

But at the end of the day, I have to say I don't expect much from this particular treasure. It might shed some light on the currents that ran through the church as it emerged in the second and third centuries, but it is most certainly not a reliable witness to the historical ministry of Jesus, or even Judas for that matter. And though some day I *might* be smitten by the possibilities of understanding the faith and motivations of Judas Iscariot, for right now if there were only *one* disciple whom I might choose to bring to life, whose witness and testament I would want to ponder, and take apart, and digest, it would be the one who lies center stage in our reading for this morning: Thomas, called the doubter.

Not that there have not been similar discoveries in the past regarding him. In Spiritual Quest classes I enjoy introducing our confirmands to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, with its stories of the boy Jesus molding pigeons out of clay, and then touching them to life so that they fly off into the heavens. The *Acts of Thomas* are given almost scriptural weight in the churches of India, where tradition suggests that Thomas was the disciple who was given the assignment of bringing the Gospel to that subcontinent (and who, so the story in the *Acts of Thomas* goes, was sold into slavery by the risen Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, after refusing the Lord's command to do so.) But it is, I suspect the Gospel accounts of this recalcitrant disciple that for the most part attract modern believers.

For the record, aside from the bare lists of those who were called Jesus' disciples, it is *only* John who shares these stories which many in our day carry close to our hearts: the disciple who, though steadfast, finds himself constantly pushing *through* his doubts. Unlike Peter, whose name appears well over a hundred times in all four of the Gospels, Thomas figures in three brief scenes: once as Jesus is telling his disciples that he must go up to Jerusalem, and with a dejected shrug he says "let us also go, so we may die with him"; once in the Upper Room, when he has trouble with Jesus' obtuse teaching, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?"; and finally, as we read this morning, as the unfortunate late-comer to the resurrection appearances, who insists that until he can see it with his own two eyes, he won't believe what the others have told him. That's it—the sum total witness to the doubting apostle in all of Scripture. But it's enough for him to stand as something as a cipher for many modern believers.

Because, I suspect, Thomas provides scriptural support for what may be the fundamental malady for modern believers, voiced in his firm assertion when told by the other apostles of their

experience in the Upper Room: “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.” “Documentary evidence” is what I think the lawyers call it, and there are precious few things we will accept in our lives without it. Denise and I are working on restoring the lawn in our yard, and we’re talking to several companies who think they can help. We’re not talking about a contract that will make or break anyone, but still, as we talk, we ask about other homes where they’ve done their work over the past couple of years. I ask for descriptions of the chemicals they’ll be using, and assurances that I’m not forfeiting the health of the planet for a pleasant patch of green. It’s just the way we live in this world—as Joe Friday said, “the facts, ma’am, just the facts.” And if you can’t *produce* the facts, then don’t expect too much of me.

And Thomas doesn’t just condone this posture of suspicion: he pioneered it. He makes it fashionable—maybe even necessary for the thoughtful disciple of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And I’m enough a product of my age that I don’t want to utterly dismiss him. There have been, after all, some pretty monstrous things that have been, and are being, condemned or condoned with the wide sweep of “some things you just have to take on faith.” So some want to argue against evolution, and for seven days of creations against mountains of careful scholarship and evidence. Slavery, the subjection of women, the total sinfulness of those who happen to find their hearts drawn to someone of the same sex—in every case the too-easy admonition is “it’s just what the bible teaches.” Accept it, or get out of the boat. I am indebted to Thomas’ doubt, because it liberates us from Pope Urban’s refusal to look through Galileo’s telescope, insisting that nothing to be seen through those lenses could contradict what had been told him by the Bible. As William Sloan Coffin, of dear memory, insisted, I take the Scriptures far too seriously to take them literally, and Thomas, God bless him, reminds me that Jesus himself drew one capable of such critical questioning to his side. There *is* room in the economy of salvation for a healthy dose of doubt.

But I can’t quite let Thomas off the hook *that* easily. Because at the end of the day, I’m not so sure it was his doubt that convicted him as it was the failure of his imagination. “You see, and then you believe,” Jesus said to him, “but blessed are those who do *not* see, and yet believe!” Thomas’ *real* problem was not his capacity for doubt, but rather a category error: he thought that belief was a matter of certainty—the conclusion you draw when given sufficient facts. But Jesus understood that believing is something you do when your heart is overwhelmed by possibilities that the *dictum* of the world at the end of the day cannot fully support. Faith is what is insinuated into the human soul as a place-keeper: “The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not* see” is the way it would be defined in the letter to the Hebrews. What Thomas couldn’t *quite* do was give himself to the mystery. It was Thomas’ great good fortune that at the end of the day, it didn’t matter, because the mystery gave itself to *him*.

For what it’s worth, to those of you who continue the conversations regarding how God is calling us to be faithful in this 21<sup>st</sup> century world, that might be as close as I have ever come to a definition of what I mean when I talk about the need to be more *intentional* in our life together. It’s hinted at in those few verses we read from the book of Acts this morning—which, by the way, constitute one of *my* real “Thomas points” in the biblical witness. Talk of resurrection comes a little easier to me now. But that there *ever* was a Christian community that “held all things in common” with no needy person among them, giving “to each as any had need”—well,

I've looked at the nail holes and put my hands in the side of *that* one (just read Galatians and Corinthians!) and I'm still pretty skeptical.

But what dawned on me somewhere along the line was the amazing fact that even though everyone who read that depiction of the first century church in the first century *knew* it wasn't like that, still they allowed it to stand as sacred story. Because even if it *wasn't* that way, they knew it was the way it *should* be, and they gave themselves to that mystery, and sought to live into it.

Did they succeed? Only in fits and starts. Have we made much progress along this way in two thousand years of "playing church"? The evidence is pretty incriminating! Yet still, Sunday after Sunday, God calls us together, and Sunday after Sunday, God sends us back out into the world *together* to share Good News, to heal the sick, to bind up the wounded, and to set the prisoners free. And if we, even today, can find ways of *giving* ourselves to that impossible possibility that together we are building, or at least pointing to that *whatever* it was that Jesus pointed to as God's reign, and insisted that it was as near as a touch, as near as a breath, then against all evidence, against all reason, it just might be *so!*

It doesn't require us to give up all doubts and questions. But it *does* require us to embrace possibilities and then live into their reality. It's something *I* learned, in the midst of paint rollers and floor tiles at the end of the road in the Louisiana Bayou this Lent. Could this house be flooded again? You bet. Would the work of eleven folk from "up North" who came for a week put *anyone's* life right again? Not a chance. Would some of the labor be futile? Most definitely. Every one of those doubts and questions is far more real than any optimistic forecast of recovery for that ravaged place. Would I trade that week for anything in the world? Not a chance. And I don't think I am alone among the eleven of us who went. Because in the process of it all, we found, like Thomas found, that even if you can't quite give yourself to that mystery, if you hang around long enough, the mystery will give itself to you.

Isn't that just what the Good News Women have done for us through the years, lifting up this crazy notion that a crate of chicks, a llama, a cow can make a whit of difference for those whose lives are caught in the grinding wheels of poverty? It doesn't take a cynic to observe that we will outlive all those gifts. But in this season of Resurrection, we're reminded that the sum total of our actions is not, at day's end, the sum total of our actions. The fullness of our lives is not something we have, and unroll, but something we live into—even as we *die!*

I fully understand that this is utter nonsense to the calculus that drives the world around us, which plays a zero sum game in which the one with the most toys at the end wins; in which it's the things you can wrap your hands around and poke your fingers in are the things that matter most. But the Gospel for this morning suggests that there's far more to it than meets the eye. It's as we give ourselves to that mystery; as we live into a truth that we cannot grasp, but can only grasp us, that we will begin to comprehend what flooded upon Thomas in doubt and tears: "my Lord, and my God!"

Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed!