

### “Steadfast Thomas”

Every year on the Second Sunday of Easter we hear the Gospel reading about Thomas the Twin or more infamously known as “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas has been stuck with that moniker for nearly two thousand years. It is as if he did nothing else in the Gospels except have doubts but that is not true. We hear Thomas speak several times in John’s Gospel.

First, in chapter 11 Thomas makes an important statement during the lead up to the raising of Lazarus. Jesus and the disciples are in the wilderness after a challenging time in Bethlehem. They heard first that Lazarus was unwell, and later that he had died. Having waited several days after his death, Jesus decides they should go to Bethany the home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. The disciples try to dissuade Jesus from going to Bethany. They remind Jesus that the religious authorities wanted to kill him. Going to Bethany puts them so much closer to Jerusalem where the religious leaders have gathered for Passover. Yet, Jesus makes the decision to go to Bethany despite their warnings. As they head out, Thomas says to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Thomas has no doubts about Jesus’ leadership. Nor does he doubt that dying with Jesus is to be feared. He is committed to Jesus and his ministry wherever it may take him regardless of the cost.

Second, in chapter 14 of Thomas speaks again. During a long discourse that Jesus has with the disciples he tells them that he is going to the Father. He says, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places [mansions].” He tells the disciples he is going there to prepare a place for them. He says, “And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas says to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” To which Jesus replies, “I am the way and the truth and the life.” Thomas asks the question that must have been on all their minds but no one else was willing to ask.

Despite Thomas’s willingness to speak up in these two significant instances, it is his questioning of the disciples’ experience of the risen Jesus that we have latched onto. However, a fuller picture of Thomas begins to emerge when we attend to the two other instances where Thomas speaks. We see a man dedicated to Jesus even to death. We also see a man that is willing to ask a question that others may have had but were unwilling to voice. We see Thomas as more than a skeptic among believers. We see a disciple dedicated to his teacher in ways that the other disciples are not.

Outside of the biblical writings there is a tradition about Thomas that tell us even more about him. This tradition holds that Thomas sailed to the east coast of India in 52 A.D., intending to preach the Good News of Jesus to the Jewish colonies there. He is reported to have converted many Jews and Brahmins to Christ. He then moved south along the coast through numerous villages winning hundreds of followers. Because of these efforts he became known as “The Apostle to India.”

His ministry did not stop there. He crossed to the west coast where he won more even converts to Christ. However, in this region devout Brahmins were offended by the success of his proselytizing. They had Thomas killed. He was

buried in that area, but over time his remains and relics were moved and now reside in several places in Italy. While this is not the only version of the Thomas story, what is constant across the centuries is that there are communities in South India that identify themselves as “St. Thomas Christians” to this day. His enduring legacy in India is about much more than the one episode of doubting the resurrection.

Like most people St. Thomas is more than a man of one episode. We can define him as more than a man of doubts. If I had to name Thomas based on this fuller picture of him, I think I would call him “Steadfast Thomas.” He was a man who was willing to die with Jesus. He was the man who wanted to know the full story when Jesus was talking in metaphors. This was the man that having been absent when Jesus appeared to the others wanted the same proof that they had received that Jesus was alive. Finally, he was the man who took his faith on a long journey to a people who were little known to him and shared it with so much passion and vigor that he was able to convert Jews and Gentiles to this new faith.

I grew up in a tradition where doubters were not welcome. Doubts were a sign of weakness of faith. Doubts were a sign that we did not believe sufficiently. Doubts were an indication that we were headed off the straight and narrow and on the road to hell. Yet Doubting Thomas shows us a different way. He shows us that we can have faith not just despite doubts but with the help of doubts.

Doubts are good. They show that we are using the mental faculties that God gave us. They show that we are thinking not just accepting as truth something we were told. Doubts can strengthen our faith. Doubts are essential to a mature faith.

Far from being a cynic or a skeptic Thomas was a man who desired an encounter with the living Christ. He wanted more than just hearsay. He waited an extraordinarily long week to get the validation that Jesus was alive. Having received that validation, he endeavored to spread the Gospel to the farthest reaches of the known world. He risked his life to share the Gospel with Jews and Gentiles in India, a land he did not know. He was so effective it cost him his life.

As we look back at Thomas’s impact on the early Church, we can see that modeling ourselves on this disparaged apostle could lead us to a life of rich and powerful faith in the name of Jesus. Like St. Peter who is often seen as a dope and clumsy in the way he serves Christ, Thomas is also a good model for our present practice of our faith. They both are extremely human in their attempts to follow Jesus. They express real desires to be faithful. They each had extremely successful ministries after the Resurrection. They were both martyred for their beliefs. Despite their apparent flaws, they both show us the way to live a life faithful to the Gospel sharing the love of God in Christ with conviction and passion. May we all be as steadfast as Thomas living out our faith with conviction and doubt.