

April 19, 2020 - Inspector Thomas

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Every mystery has an inspector, a detective, a sleuth. Someone who is not sidetracked by presuppositions or rumors but looks for evidence and clues.

There is a famous quote from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character, Sherlock Holmes, in the story *Sign of the 4*, that reminds me of the situation that Thomas and the disciples find themselves in in our scripture from John this morning.

"How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth? We know that he did not come through the door, the window, or the chimney. We also know that he could not have been concealed in the room, as there is no concealment possible. When, then, did he come?"

This quote just tickles me, since Jesus shows up in the room, despite the doors being locked, I don't think Doyle was thinking about the second Sunday in Easter when he wrote this story, but it's fun how they connect.

When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

There's a little meme that seems appropriate for preaching Thomas during the Corona Pandemic. Lots of us have been using Zoom or other video conferencing apps for work, for church, or even to connect with friends and family.

In this meme the disciples and Jesus are all on a zoom call, we see the faces of the eleven disciples, but the Jesus box just has his name, Simon Peter says, how on earth is he in the meeting. But Thomas says, "Unless he turns on his camera, I won't believe it."

Thomas, doubting Thomas, gets a bad rap. But his story is not that different than the other disciples. Mary sees the empty tomb but doesn't believe until she meets Jesus in the garden. The other disciples hear the women's testimony, and some even go to the tomb, but they don't believe until Jesus shows up in the room later. It doesn't seem fair that Thomas should become doubting Thomas just because he didn't have the same opportunity that the others did.

Thomas is after all, looking for clues, he's looking for evidence. Not too many people have gone from dead to alive, and while he loves his friends, I'm sure I would wonder too if my friends claimed that a friend who was dead was now alive. During this pandemic there have been so many rumors and conspiracy theories, I'm sure you've had friends share something as fact that later turned out to be false. Maybe you've even spread misinformation yourself and later regretted it. There is a virtue in Thomas' wanting to be sure before he believes.

Clayton Schmitt writes that the gospel of John is written as if for a courtroom. As John tells the Jesus story, he is interested, more than the other gospel writers, in convincing a jury of exactly who Jesus is. John presents the evidence clearly and not "just the facts," but the meaning behind the facts. Thomas is the skeptical witness, he's a stand in for all of John's readers, for us, "if something sounds too good to be true, then it's almost certainly untrue." Evidence is the only thing that will convince Thomas.

Thomas looks for clues and he finds them. Jesus shows up once again a week later, allows Thomas to see and invites him to touch, and Thomas falls to the floor and says, "My Lord and My God."

Jesus responds to Thomas and says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Thomas becomes the first to recognize Jesus as God. What a blessing. Sometimes I think we misinterpret Jesus' words to Thomas. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Sometimes I read it like this:

"Geez Thomas, you idiot, you had to see to believe. Other people haven't seen, and they believe, why can't you be more like the blessed ones? I'm so ashamed of you."

But I think that misses the point, and that doesn't sound like the God who is love.

I've never seen the physically resurrected Jesus, most of us under the age of 2,000 haven't. But we believe. Not because we're better people than Thomas, but because the Holy Spirit has been working in our lives to give evidence to our hearts and minds of God's presence among us. I don't believe blindly or because people in authority have told me to believe, I believe because my own experience, and the experience of the saints who have gone before me and the saints who are in my community have convinced me that Jesus is alive. The testimony of scripture is convincing in concert with the testimony of the Christian tradition, the testimony of my own reason, and the testimony of our collective experience.

Jesus isn't saying, "I'm so ashamed of you Thomas and everyone else who doesn't believe." Jesus is saying, there are going to be people who are blessed through the witness of my spirit, through the telling of this story, through the testimony of other believers. I am willing to give evidence of my resurrection, even to those who don't get to see me."

I learned earlier this week that the season of Easter was historically a time of going deeper into the mysteries of faith. In other words, looking for evidence of God with us in the midst of regular life. I shared this with some friends the other night and one friend said, "I saw God today at work, just when I was about to yell and lose my mind, something started working in my work from home software and I was able to meet my performance goal. I was on the edge of giving up and God broke through." Another friend talked about watching her daughter delight in their new baby chicks that came this week, and seeing God reflected in her joy. Another friend talked about thinking that her position was going to be eliminated, but she heard that she has a job at least through the end of June, and God is a God who provides. A fourth friend lost his grandfather this week and talked about all the phone calls he's been receiving from friends.

Look for God, practice mystagogy this week, look for the presence of our resurrected God.

Amen.