

“Doubting the Crucifixion”
Easter 2b
John 20:19-31

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In Jesus' Name.

I feel sorry for Thomas carrying around the nickname Doubting all these centuries. Maybe some of you carried around a nickname but managed to lose it after high school or college. In High School my nickname was Big Mo. I was bigger than I am now. Most nicknames seem to reflect physical characteristics. I read a sermon this past week in which a preacher named James Lowry told of the phone call that awakened his father. “It was the chief of police of our small town in the Piedmont of South Carolina. The chief reported that one of his officers, Bean Pole Hammond by name, had caught” someone pilfering his hardware store.¹ In seminary we had professors we nicknamed Red Fred and Black Bill. They lost their nicknames when their hair turned white. Crazy Gil got his nickname for the amount of energy he brought to class. He has not lost any energy. And then there was Willie the Pimp. I knew that would get your attention. There was nothing sexual about the nickname. And he didn't drive a big car or wear flashy suits, not on his Lutheran college salary. His nickname had to do with the difficult tests he gave and the delight he took over our struggles with them.

Most of these folks outgrew their nicknames. Not Thomas. Doubting Thomas never managed to shake his. He could just as easily have been known as Resolute Thomas for the time he said to the other disciples, “Let us also go with him to Jerusalem that we may die with him.” He could have been called Directionally Challenged Thomas for the time he said to Jesus, “Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?” He was ready to go. He was Ready Thomas. He just needed directions. However, he does not pick up his moniker from either

¹ James S. Lowry, “Preaching the 2009 Easter Texts,” *Journal for Preachers* (Easter 2009), 5.

of these incidents. He became known for his obstinacy in the upper room the week after Easter. Mary Magdalene doubted until Jesus called her by name. We don't call her Doubting Mary. The other disciples doubted the news of resurrection that Mary Magdalene brought them. We don't call them Doubting Disciples. We save it all for Thomas, Doubting Thomas. And he is called the twin. No twin is named, so some suggest the gospel-writer John means him as our twin. If so, we'd rather be twin to Resolute Thomas or Ready Thomas. But no, he is Doubting Thomas who is our twin.

If it was only doubt. Doubt and belief go hand-in-hand. Doubt is embedded in faith and vice versa. Our doubts may make us stand offish but they still direct us to God. Thomas's problem was worse than doubt. Thomas said, "Unless I see and touch I will not believe." Jesus said to him, "Do not disbelieve, but believe." He is not Doubting Thomas. He is Faithless Thomas. Unbelief is the very heart of sin according to John. The accumulated evidence of our moral failures are our sins, written with a small s. Sin, written with a capital S, is lack of faith, a refusal to believe the good news of Jesus Crucified and raised for us. There is much at stake. Early in John's Gospel we hear the promise, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gives power to become the children of God." John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life." At the end of our Gospel reading today, John tells us the reason he wrote all this down is so that we might believe in Jesus and have life in his name. Being a child of God, having eternal life as present and current gifts of God, this is what is at stake for Thomas in his unbelief. It is what is at stake for his twins as well.

On Easter evening "Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side." A week later, when Thomas was

present, Jesus showed up again and said, “‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe.’

“Thomas answered him....” I got to this point in the story, reading it last Friday afternoon to Monte Cross who is in a nursing home in Wheaton. I was afraid he had fallen asleep or was distracted by the radio his roommate had turned up so loud. But I got to this point in the story, “Thomas answered him....” Monte answered, “My Lord and My God.” With that answer Thomas showed himself to be Confessing Thomas and Monte was his twin. Let us be their twin in making the confession of faith, “My Lord and my God.” What nickname shall they give? Confessing Thomas, Confessing Monte.

The wounds of Christ are closely connected with the Holy Spirit Jesus breathes upon us disciples, the peace which flows with his breath upon us, and his sending us as the Father sent him. If we pick up nicknames by physical characteristics, by what name shall we be known. What are the marks we inherit from Jesus? How do we recognize the body of Christ amidst all the other bodies? We recognize Christ’s body the same way they recognized the risen Christ, by those wounds. We bear those wounds in the Word proclaimed and the sacraments celebrated. What we do with Word and sacrament is to say, “Peace be with you” and to show Jesus’ hands and side. And more than that, with Word, water, bread and cup, we extend the invitation, “Put your finger here. Reach out your hand and place it in his side. Do not be disbelieving but believe.” “My Lord and my God,” we confess with hands extended to receive him in the Lord’s Supper.

We further bear those wounds in the ministry upon which Jesus sends us. Pastor Lowry, who told us about the deputy named Bean Pole Hammond, went on to say the person Bean Pole

caught pilfering his father's hardware store was Billy B____, "a twelve-year-old throw-away yard child of a hard-living, down-on-her-luck woman who lived with her brood on the wrong edge of the wrong side of town. Characteristically, even before asking about the condition of the store and its merchandise, my father's first question was what had they done with Billy B____. They had taken him twenty miles away to the county jail.

"The next morning after breakfast, as was his unshakable custom, Pappy read from the Bible. Pappy left his book mark in the place he had left off the day before and skipped to Matthew 25. He slowed down his measured reading when he got to the verse where it says Jesus said, "I was in prison and you visited me." He slowed down again when he got to the verse where it says Jesus said, 'In as much as you have done it to the least of these... you have done it unto me.' After that, without comment, he offered our family's morning prayer, including prayer for Billy B____. Then he got up and, after kissing Mom goodbye, drove the twenty miles to the county court house and talked his friend, the county judge, into 'sentencing' Bill B____ to live with us for three months.

Thus it was that Billy B____, with neither shoes nor shirt and only one pair of high water pants, came into our lives. He was welcomed as a son and brother with, as they say, all the rights and responsibilities appertaining thereunto. He lived with us for three months because he had to. For several years after that... he lived with us as often as he needed or wanted a clean bed, clean clothes, and a place at the table. By most recent accounts, Billy, his wife, children and grandchildren are all getting on quite nicely." Pastor Lowry has given us a picture of what it looks like to be, as we say in the creed, "one, holy, catholic and apostolic."² One body, that is

² Ibid.

holy (meaning “set apart”), catholic (meaning “for the sake of the world”), and apostolic (meaning “sent” throughout the world and also twenty miles to the county courthouse).

The physical characteristics that identify us are the same ones by which Jesus was known, his wounds. What then is our nickname? By what name shall we be known?

To us who received him, who believed in his name he gives power to become children of God. That makes us brothers and sisters of Jesus. We have his clean clothes to wear. His hand-me-downs are the white robes in which we were wrapped at our baptism. We have a place at this table. In God’s family we have, as they say, “all the rights and rights and responsibilities appertaining thereunto.” When God the Father looks at us he can’t tell us apart from Jesus. So close is the family resemblance he could be our twin. Christian is how we are known and what we are called. It is a name we will never grow out of.