

“Stories of Transformation” sermon series
April 11, 2010 From Doubt to Belief, Thomas
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John 20:19-31

I love stories. Good stories convey truth within the messy complexity of real life. Stories can act on our whole person, not just our minds. There are many levels of meaning in good stories, that’s why we can return again and again to the ancient stories in the Bible and find ourselves in them as part of God’s story.

This morning we heard the story of Thomas, the Twin, from the Gospel of John. Many of you have probably heard of this disciple we often call “Doubting Thomas,” but his story really is the story of all Jesus’ followers in the aftermath of the resurrection.

Thomas, for some reason, missed out on seeing and hearing Jesus that first Easter evening in the locked-up house with the rest of the disciples. The other disciples were hiding in the house in fear of the authorities – remember that the first Jesus-followers were Jews themselves, so when the text in John says the disciples were hiding from “the Jews,” it means the religious authorities and not all Jews. So maybe the disciples locked themselves in the house because they were afraid of getting in trouble themselves as known Jesus-followers. Maybe they were hiding because stealing bodies was a capital crime in the Roman Empire and they didn’t want to be accused of stealing Jesus’ body. In any case, Jesus’ followers were holed up in the house even though Mary told them she talked to Jesus in the garden that morning, she told them that she had seen the Lord! The other disciples hadn’t seen Jesus for themselves, so they didn’t believe her story. Those disciples doubted until Jesus showed up in their midst, displaying his hands and side and speaking to them. There in the locked house, Jesus came blessing his followers and sending them out to reveal God to the world, accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

Then a week passed. The disciples told Thomas about their experiences of the resurrected Jesus. Twice, Thomas missed out on seeing Jesus, and he wasn't shy about saying he didn't believe the tales. Can you imagine what that week after Easter must have been like for Thomas? For all he knew, his teacher was dead, the body gone, and his future uncertain. His friends are telling crazy tales, fantastical stories of empty tombs, of Jesus being alive and not just a ghost, but who would believe them? No wonder he doubted! But the thing about Thomas, this Twin who had followed Jesus during his ministry, the thing about Thomas is that he stayed with his friends anyway. Thomas is still with them even though it doesn't feel quite safe and things don't make a lot of sense. The thing about Thomas is that he's in the house with the disciples a week later when Jesus appears again. Thomas is available when Jesus appears in their midst.

And Jesus does show up again. He comes along in his crazy body that can pass through locked doors and closed-up houses, but still has the marks of execution and can still be touched. He comes offering Thomas what Thomas needs in order to believe. Some of the commentators say that Jesus comes to Thomas being sarcastic or pushy. Its hard for me to imagine that if Jesus' ministry was about revealing a God of love whose desire for is the blessing of the cosmos, that Jesus would come to Thomas to shame him into a confession of faith. It makes more sense that Jesus came into that house, knowing exactly what Thomas needed and offering it to him, freely, in love, offering him the chance to touch Jesus' wounds himself. But Thomas didn't end up needing to do that. When Thomas saw Jesus and heard his words, Thomas exclaimed, "my Lord and my God" and his life changed again. He went from doubt to belief. He was transformed. What a story!

We don't know exactly how Thomas was transformed after his experience of the Risen Christ. He's not mentioned in the Bible in detail after that. However, one ancient document

reports that Thomas did missionary work in Parthia, which is around modern-day Iran. There is even a tradition that Thomas was the first Christian missionary to India and was martyred there. In moving from doubt to belief, in being transformed by his encounter with the on-going love of God through Jesus the Christ, Thomas became one of the early founders of the church. Thomas' transformation mattered to other people.

What did you hear in this story of Doubting Thomas? What caught your attention? What was meaningful? Did you hear yourself in it at all? The author of the gospel of John wants you to hear yourself in this story. I find myself envying Thomas a bit, even though we in the church have called Thomas “the Doubter” with scorn for a long time. I envy him because he got to see and hear the Risen Christ in person.

The Gospel of John was written in a time when the people who actually had experienced Jesus in the flesh were dying away. The first Jesus-followers weren't available to encourage the younger disciples with their powerful stories of transformation. Perhaps the younger generation was envious of people like Thomas, too, because that second generation wasn't going to have experiences of Jesus like Thomas and Mary and the rest of the first disciples did. Like us, the original audience of the Gospel of John didn't get to hear Jesus teach in person or travel with him, or see him after the resurrection. So, this story is told for people like us.

Did you notice how Jesus also blessed *us* during Thomas' encounter with Jesus? He said “Blessed are those that have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (vs. 29). The Greek could equally well be translated, “Blessed are those that have not seen and yet continue to believe.” Jesus blessed people like us! And the author of the Gospel of John closed the story by saying “these [signs] are written so you may come to believe” (vs. 31) or “continue to believe.” This

story is told so people like us may continue to believe that Jesus came as a revelation of our loving God. The author of the gospel wants us to be encouraged in our discipleship. Encouraged, because sometimes its hard to believe. Even Thomas, who experienced Jesus in person, needed Jesus' encouragement to continue in belief, to continue living as a disciple of Jesus. Those closing words of this chapter and the blessing of Jesus, puts those of us who didn't get to experience Jesus first-hand on equal footing with those who did. This means we are on equal footing for believing, and equal footing for being sent out by Jesus to continue revealing God to those who do not know God's love.

Belief, "believing" for the author of the Gospel of John isn't just about believing in resurrection as a claim. It's not about belief in the resurrection itself, but about what the resurrection is a sign of, what it points to. It points to seeing Jesus as the One who reveals God, a loving God who promised to be a blessing to all the nations, who cares about the sparrow and the widow and the orphan. Believing is about fully entering into discipleship with the God Jesus revealed, the Holy One who responds to the world primarily out of love. With the Maker of the Universe who is defined by relationship with humanity and with the rest of creation. Belief isn't just about one person's transformation from doubt to faith, its about the community of believers being sent out to share God's love in the world. Jesus, in that shut up house where the disciples were hiding, sent those transformed people out in the world to reveal God to those who did not know God yet.

To reveal a loving God who cares even for a woman like Trinity. Trinity – that's really her name – is a young woman from Appalachia who got to know a church group down from Indiana to help with repair work on the little houses along her street. Trinity knew about God before she met this group. She even told the visiting pastor that she thought about being

baptized. But she wasn't ready, she said., because she wanted to take care of a few things first before being baptized. Her to-do list included: quit smoking, finish her G.E.D., and get a job to help support her mom and her younger siblings. That list may have even included a few other things that Trinity didn't want to admit to the pastor. Even so, the pastor was ready to baptize her right then and there because he knew God already loves her. The Holy One's bottomless love does not depend on what Trinity or anyone else does or does not do. Trinity still wasn't ready and didn't receive her baptism before the group left. So we don't know the rest of her story. But maybe, just maybe, Jesus came to her with what she needed through that church group of transformed disciples. Perhaps that group was a witness to God's love of her right then and there whether or not she was baptized that week.

As Jesus offered himself to Thomas as motivation to move from doubt to belief, we, as Jesus' disciples, are sent out like God sent Jesus, to witness to God's love for each and for all.

Will you make yourself available to encounter the risen Jesus, even in your moments of doubt?

Can you let yourself be transformed by God's love?

And then, as a disciple of Christ, will you witness to that love to those who do not yet know how much they are loved?

Perhaps, in your own story of transformation in the aftermath of the Resurrection, you will be what someone else needs