

SEVEN WORDS - WOW
A SERMON BASED ON JOHN 20:24-29
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 2019
10 a.m.
“EASTER SUNDAY”

We mostly know the disciple Thomas because of the adjective given to him.

‘Doubting’.

Doubting Thomas.

His words and behaviour in today’s Scripture are so well known,

that it has become an idiom in the English language.

That person is such a ‘doubting Thomas.’

That is a person, who refuses to believe it, unless they see it.

Thomas is an interesting personality.

I kinda like him.

He’s a little awkward.

He’s the guy that says the stuff

that makes the rest of the room uncomfortable.

Thomas seems to be the one

who will make the point of telling you why it can't be done.

He is the one who sees and names the obstacles.

We've heard his kind of voice before.

"Where exactly is the money going to come from for that?"

"Nobody is going to want to do that."

"You can't do that. Someone will put in a grievance with the union."

"Did you get it in writing?"

On the continuum of personality type,

Thomas is at the opposite end from the dreamer.

He's the realist.

He sees the facts, the barriers,
and the potential consequences.

He's the one who remembers what happened last time,
how it worked out for others when they weren't prepared.

He is the one in tune with what happens
when people get their hopes up too high.

He provides the reality check.

Thomas is the guy who always brings it back down to earth.

Last week we recalled the event of the raising of Lazarus.

Back in chapter 11, the sisters of Jesus' friend Lazarus sent
a message to Jesus.

“Lord, the one you love is sick.”

It was a request for Jesus to come and heal Lazarus.

The trouble was, Lazarus' home was in the town of Bethany,

just a short walk over the hill

outside of Jerusalem in the territory of Judea.

Jerusalem was the location of the temple,

so it was where the chief priests,

the Sanhedrin - the ruling elders,

and the Pharisees congregated.

Everyone who hated Jesus was concentrated there.

Hearing about Lazarus, Jesus said, “Let's go back to Judea.”

He might as well have said said to a fish,

let's jump back into that net we just escaped from.

His disciples spoke up,

‘A short while ago the Jews tried to stone you Jesus,

and yet you are going to go back?'

They were hesitating.

It was a risky proposition.

Thomas was the one who sighed with the inevitability of it all.

It was Thomas who said to the others.

'Let's go with Jesus,

so we may die with him.'

It didn't seem to cross Thomas' mind that Jesus

might have a plan that reached well beyond Lazarus.

Thomas didn't rally the disciples with hopeful possibilities.

Thomas was the reality check.

We'll probably die if we go back to Jerusalem.

So, well, let's at least die with Jesus.

I can't make up my mind if Thomas was loyal to death,

or a just a fatalist.

I think he may well have been both.

The next time we hear Thomas's voice, it's in chapter 14.

It was the last supper.

Jesus had washed his disciples' feet.

He had predicted his betrayal.

He had predicted Peter's denial.

Jesus had told them he must die.

There were loving declarations of both loyalty and anxiety.

The room was dripping with heavy emotion.

Jesus said to his disciples,

'Don't let your hearts be troubled.

Trust in God. Trust also in me.

I am going to prepare a place for you.

And I will come back and take you to be with me,

that you also may be where I am.'

It's a statement of promise.

It has all the weight of a wedding proposal.

It is that moment of movie magic where you can hear a pin drop,

where women reach for a tissue and

guys pretend they've got something in their eye.

Thomas breaks the moment.

'Um Lord, we don't know where you are going,
so how can we know the way?'

You almost want Sheldon Cooper to play the part of Thomas.

Thomas is the guy who at the poignant moment points out,
a flaw in the system.

You haven't given us an address.

You haven't given us a map Jesus.

So, really, how can we know the way?

Jesus is speaking about connection and togetherness and promise
and the future together and hope.

Thomas is looking for the map.

"I'm not seeing it Jesus.

Should we take the QEW or would back roads be better?"

I can only imagine Thomas' reaction to Jesus' answer to where are you
going with,

I am the way, the truth and the life.

It's not a big leap to imagine Thomas saying,

‘Jesus, I can’t put that into the GPS!!’

Thomas’s world was not a world of endless possibilities
and ideas and concepts.

His was not a world of faith.

Thomas was fully committed to the world of here and now,
what he could see and what had to be done.

Thomas was ready to die with Jesus on a return trip to Jerusalem
to see Lazarus.

“If that’s what it takes Jesus, then I’m going.”

It’s not that he wasn’t all in.

I believe he fully intended to follow.

He genuinely wanted the road map for where Jesus’ was going.

Just get me the directions Lord. I’ll be there.

I don’t question Thomas’ commitment.

It’s a full commitment.

I think he’s a ‘Show me what I’m supposed to do and I’ll do it Lord.’

kind of guy.

I think he’s a, ‘If this is how it’s going to be,

if this is where we have to go, and this is what we have to do,
well then, let's suck it up and let's get to it.' person.

Like I said, I kind of like him.

Knowing this about him,

I'm sympathetic to his situation in today's passage.

Because one of the things

that tends to be true about personalities like Thomas,

the 'Let's just do this.' personalities,

the 'Just give it to me straight.' personalities,

is that, if it isn't going to happen,

if what was expected doesn't come together,

if what how it was supposed to happen changes,

if it seems to be becoming all just words,

those people built like Thomas tend to drop out.

"That's not what it said in the ad.

That's not what I signed up for.

So, I can't trust this.

I'm out. Done. Forget it. Finished.

Thomas wasn't with the disciples when Jesus' first appeared to them
after his resurrection.

I'm really curious as to where he was, why he wasn't there.

I have a suspicion he was just done.

We don't know where Thomas was,

but he wasn't going to be hanging out with the disciples.

I imagine Jesus disappointed him.

Thomas asked Jesus,

we don't know where you are going,

how can we know the way?

Jesus not only did not meet him at the place they agreed,

he was executed.

I think Jesus' crucifixion blew apart any sense of plan for the future.

I think Jesus' death finished Thomas.

How can you commit yourself to a plan that has vanished

and a person who is gone?

I can easily imagine Thomas' voice.

“That’s it. Done. Forget it. Finished.

Whatever Jesus was supposed to be,

supposed to do,

doesn’t matter.

I don’t care anymore.

He’s dead and I’m done.”

I can hear the disappointment in his initial no show with the others.

I can hear the disappointment in his resistance

when the disciples tell him they had seen the Lord.

When you look at the original Greek

it carries the tone, of having to be persistent

almost argumentative, in order to convince,

‘They tried to tell him, that they had seen the Lord.’

When I hear Thomas' reaction to them trying to convince him,

I can hear his broken trust. Jesus didn’t come through, he’s dead.

I can hear him thinking, ‘I’m not going to be fooled again.’

I can hear him take his approach to life,

His 'Prove it to me and show me how this is going to work'
pattern to a whole new level of intensity.

He growls to the disciples,

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands,
and put my finger where the nails were,
and put my hand into his side,
I will not believe it.”

I think this statement shows Thomas to be pretty raw
with hurt, disappointment and broken trust.

I also think Thomas doesn't think
there's the remotest chance
he might get called out on his 'prove it!' statement.

I believe he's confident it's never going to happen.

The reason I think this is because I've been to the wound care clinic.

I've visited enough people in hospital to see some wounds.

No one who has actually seen a wound would ever say,

Unless I put my hand in there....

Thomas can say it, because he doesn't believe it'll happen.

I like Thomas because his approach to the life of faith

a life of following Jesus.

feels oh, so very familiar.

I can identify with him.

Really, we're a congregation of Thomases.

How many times have we wanted assurances from Jesus?

Tell me it's going to be okay.

How many times have we wanted him to give us the map?

Tell me how this is going to go.

How many times have we been disappointed with him?

Tell me just what it was you were thinking.

How many times have we got stuck in the difficulty of the moment?

Jesus, I know you love me,

I know I'm a beloved child of the most high and all that,

yada, yada, yada,

but what's going to happen with my job?

I've got bills to pay.

Jesus, I know you are the great physician,
and I know that every time you healed someone,
your greater priority seemed to be reminding them
that their sins are forgiven,
and that seems really nice,
I don't see how practical it is but it's nice.
But the thing is I've got a doctor's appointment tomorrow,
and I want to know just exactly what you are up to here.

Jesus, I know you said to forgive others and turn the other cheek,
and let vengeance be yours and all that.
But I have been betrayed.
My heart has been stomped on
and I'm not willing to give it
to anyone again,
not even you.
At least not until you get that work thing addressed.
And I get a good report from the doctor.

Unless I see the proof I demand, I will not believe.

We know we can't admit it. But we've thought it. Felt it.

We can be a lot like Thomas.

A week later, the disciples were in the house again.

Thomas was with them this time.

I don't know what changed his mind.

I don't know why, maybe they wore him down.

Or maybe they promised not to talk about seeing Jesus.

But then, even though the doors were locked.

Even with the barriers up and the group hunkered down,

Jesus came and stood among them

and declared, 'Peace be with you.'

Now, I don't know who told Jesus

about what Thomas had said the week before,

but Jesus totally had Thomas' number.

He called Thomas out.

Hey Thomas, put your finger here.

Reach out your hand, put it in my side.

The only thing missing is 'I dare you.'

It's interesting, the Italian renaissance painter Caravaggio shows Thomas sticking his finger right in Jesus' side, pulling back the skin like you'd pull back closed curtains.

Caravaggio's Thomas had to touch Jesus.

Scripture doesn't say that Thomas had to touch Jesus to believe.

Jesus told him to stop doubting and believe.

Perfect words for the guy who had to have all the facts.

Stop doubting.

You don't have to have it all figured out.

You don't have to own all the facts,

or be prepared for any possible obstacle

or have mapped out

all the potential consequences and all the possible outcomes.

Stop doubting, Jesus said to Thomas.

And believe.

The word believe in the gospel of John carries a much richer meaning

than the way we use it today.

We tend to use believe as an intellectual ascent.

We use believe to describe something we agree with.

We'll say, I believe that.

Not so the gospel of John.

Believe in this gospel is a deep, gut-level trust.

Do you believe this chair will hold your weight?

The gospel of John's meaning of believe

is that you will sit down on it.

Jesus said to Thomas,

“Stop doubting and believe.”

And here is just one of the coolest things ever in the gospel of John.

Thomas, doubting Thomas,

good ol' fact checking, waiver writing,

have the lawyer read it over, Thomas,

has his wow moment.

Wow is old Scottish,

defined as a natural expression of amazement.

Wowed, Thomas declares, “My Lord and My God.”

Peter is famous for his confession of Christ.

He said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Thomas is wowed to a whole other level.

Thomas makes it personal.

My Lord and My God.

Jesus said to him, because you have seen me,

you have believed,

blessed are those who have not seen,

and yet have believed.

I think Jesus has simply recognized here,

that it is a gift to be able to trust, to believe Jesus.

There are times life does not go according to plan,

or at least, according to our plan.

There are times when it feels as though the rug has been

pulled out from under us and we have landed flat on our backs.

There are times when it feels that the trust we have

put in God, our faith,
has been betrayed and undone.

A crucifixion. An abandonment. A death.

I get Thomas.

I've been Thomas.

There are times I am Thomas.

That's it. Finished.

Unless I see the nail marks and put my fingers where the nails were.

Unless I put my hand into his side,

Unless this happens...

I won't believe.

I won't trust.

That's it. Done. The door is locked and no one is getting in.

But this is where the Christian faith just rocks and breaks open our world.

Jesus shows up and wows us.

Jesus shows up and amazes us.

Try locking the door if you like.

Try keeping him out.

Jesus shows up. Jesus will always show up.

Because the crucifixion isn't the end.

Jesus' death isn't where it ends.

That expectation you had that wasn't met

isn't the end of the story

that map that you were following that got you lost

isn't the end of the road

that loss

isn't the consummation of the plan.

Whatever has caused you say to God,

'Unless I see this.... then,'

That thing isn't the end.

Jesus will wow you.

Jesus will show up.

In some fashion or another he'll show up.

In a sermon, in a song, in your Bible reading for the day,

in the words of a friend,

in a memory from the days you went to church camp,

or Sunday School

in prayer,

in an unexpected kindness, message, moment of grace
he'll show up right through your locked doors.

The question is are you going to demand to see and poke around
in the wounds?

Or will you let yourself be wowed at Jesus presence and his love
and his willingness to appear to you.

Will you be wowed to see that with Jesus and in Jesus
there is a new life,

beyond your map, your expectations, and your plan.

Will you declare your amazement and yourself to Jesus.

'My Lord and my God.'?

There is quite reliable evidence and legend,

that while the other disciples went west,

to places like Syria, Cyprus, Galatia, Greece, Rome.

Thomas went east, to southern India.

There is a 2000 year old Christian community in southern India.

It's so like Thomas.

I have to laugh.

When Jesus said, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, Judea,
to the ends of the earth.

Where does Thomas go?

Through Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and across almost
the whole of India.

If he chose to go by sea, he went across half the Indian Ocean.

Can't you hear him?

“Jesus said to ‘to the ends of the earth’ guys.”

I'm going to the end.

Thomas had been wowed.

Jesus death on the cross was not the end.

It was the gateway to a resurrected life.

Thomas had his Lord and his God.

Wherever you are, you have not come to the end.

You don't need to keep digging in wounds to believe.

What you need, is to keep an eye out for Jesus.

When you see him, because you will,
recognize Jesus to be your Lord.
see that Jesus is your God.
Let yourself be wowed.

Amen.