

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Honest Thomas"
Dr. J. Dent

April 11, 2010
Second Sunday of Easter

We've all had a chance to be around people at some time in our lives who seem to be able to say things that make us awkward and uncomfortable. Most of the time, these individuals do not set out to intentionally make others around them squirm, although some do. They just speak their mind, and often whatever is on it at the time. Others, while under some pressure to speak to a situation, choose not to, thereby also making us wonder what might cause them to speak. All of us hopefully can see in ourselves moments of these two extremes, running on at the mouth, or keeping silent when it would more responsible to say something.

Thomas, in the gospel of John, is a fascinating study of such a person. In chapter 11 of John, he apparently doesn't understand what Jesus is doing in terms of why he is waiting for Lazarus to die. But Thomas does want to affirm what Jesus is doing, even if he doesn't really understand what is going on. He says in chapter 11, verse 16, that if Lazarus is dead, let us go and die with him. It sounds somewhat coherent, but in the end only winds up being nonsense. Or perhaps Thomas thought that Jesus was speaking of some kind of spiritual dying, and not a real physical death, that Jesus was telling his disciples that Lazarus had already experienced. So Thomas just talks and speaks his mind.

This is to my mind both awkward and admirable. The awkward part is that I probably would have just kept my mouth shut, but Thomas goes ahead and shoots his. The admirable part is that he has the courage to say what's on his mind.

This courage is what leads to the revelation of a major truth in chapter 14. Here we find Thomas again speaking his mind and verbalizing his ignorance. Jesus was trying to tell his closest friends that he was about to do this week. He was saying that he was going to prepare a great reunion to which they were all invited and in fact, billions others. Jesus mentioned in passing that they all knew how to get there and where he was going. But Thomas in his own way was able to say, "No, I don't understand a word of it. I don't know where you are going. I don't know the way. Please tell me what you are talking about." This is where Jesus says that in fact he does

know the way. This is because Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. So Jesus explains the way as a relationship with himself. He explains the truth to Pilate before the crucifixion and he explains the life to John, who makes a major theme of his gospel and letters.

The beautiful thing about Thomas is that he was bold enough to express himself and his ignorance. He was honest. None of the other disciples at that point piped up, although Philip would make a demand later in chapter 14, which showed his ignorance. The fact is that we all have much to learn from the Lord. It should not shock us, if we are teachable, that we have much to learn spiritually from Jesus. So then the question simply becomes whether we are courageous enough to express our ignorance and become learners anew at the feet of the Lord. For many this is a bitter pill to swallow. But please remember that our Lord is gracious and loving, and patient, unlike many others in our lives. Thomas experienced this first hand.

Thomas wasn't there with the remaining disciples when Jesus showed himself to the disciples, when he gave them the Holy Spirit, and commissioned them to tell the Good News of the forgiveness of sins, and the warning for those who choose to reject the gospel. But Thomas was there a week after the first day of the resurrection, that is what we call today, the second Sunday of Easter, the Sunday after Easter Sunday.

Earlier Thomas told the disciples that he wasn't going to believe. He saw that they were full of joy and amazed at the resurrection of the Lord. He had to see it for himself. And for this declaration of faith, which was even more detailed, he had to touch the scars in Jesus' hands and side, before he would believe. He was again being honest and courageous enough to say what was going on in his mind. Sometimes such honesty might be a way to simply put off believing or trusting in this supernatural work of the Lord. But we find out later that Thomas was not putting off trusting the Lord. He was searching for the truth and was willing to change his mind in the Lord's direction, once he had found out that everything his friends had told him was true. He was bold enough and courageous enough to worship the Lord Jesus by calling him his Lord and his God!

Jesus then takes that teachable moment and says that you and I are even more blessed than Thomas when we receive the truth of the gospel, the Good News, without having to see and touch the Lord the way Thomas did.

The inclusion of Thomas' experience of Jesus and his own journey in John's gospel helps us understand our own. We all need to keep researching and to keep learning in this faith relationship we have with God. This is not a stagnant or unchanging relationship. Like any other relationship in life, our relationship with God and with Jesus requires our time, our attention, and our passion. If we have a passive relationship with the Lord, then we will not be ready when life crises blind side us. We need to put money in the account of our relationship with the Lord, just as we need to put deposits into our marriage relationships, our children, our neighbors, our co-workers, our friends. Every relationship requires an active status to be a growing one. Once we slip into passive mode, then we should not be surprised when our relationship disappoints us. We need to look first to our own attitudes, actions and behaviours before we blame the other party for what we see as their fault(s) in the situation.

Thomas keeps us honest. At least, that's what I hear when I read his story. And you know, many preachers use Thomas' interaction with the Lord as their main text at funerals. Why might this be? It is because we all need to be honest with ourselves and the Lord in the midst of our losses. All the game playing and all the denial and all the range of emotions come out when we lose someone or something we deeply love. In our grief, we have a chance to be opened to the Lord in ways we could have otherwise never imagined.

Thomas inspires us to courage. I wish I could say I always had the courage to speak my convictions and my faith in every situation. I do not have such courage. I am learning. I am seeking to acknowledge my fears and anxieties as they come up, so that God will change them over to faith and trust in Him for the circumstance and relationship challenges I face. I am also seeking to be honest about these things in small groups, where I can be safe to tell my story, with all my sins, faults, imperfections and strengths and gifts. As I tell my story, confess my sins, ask for healing and for prayer, I find new courage to agree with reality and to agree with God.

In myself, I lose hope. I play the Mission Impossible tapes to myself. Do you remember that old TV series, before the new movies? The tape would play and then self-destruct in five seconds. In one of the tapes I play often, I tell myself I'll never get any better and constantly make the mistakes and sins that I have for years. But God willing, I can change, and you can too.

Thomas gives us hope. Look at his change of heart. Look at his devotion to the Lord. He wasn't afraid to call Jesus his Lord and God.

And today we say the same to the Bailey family. You weren't afraid to say, "I do" to the questions put to you. And similarly the congregation wasn't afraid to say "We do" to the question put to them. We need each other. We need the Lord to help us keep our promises. We need to grow in our faith and not be afraid of saying how little we know, and how much we need to learn. Even if we are greatly learned in some other area of life, in some academic discipline or some professional qualification, nevertheless, we have much to learn of our faith and how to live it out in these days. We look to Thomas as a model of honesty and courage.

Let us pray.