

“The Twin”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 19, 2009

Second Sunday of Easter
Rev. John Wahl

I John 1:5 – 2:2
John 20:19-29

To me, my two brothers look like my brothers, but others have commented that the resemblance is even closer. One Sunday years ago, in between worship services, one of the church’s venerable saints approached my visiting older brother and asked if he could please pray for her sister who had been ill. “Of course,” he responded, “but you might want to ask John to pray for her as well.”

I realize, though, that looking like twins is not the same as actually being twins. As much as I may have in common with my two brothers, we do not share nearly all of the same interests, thoughts and mannerisms. And while to a certain extent we have always looked out for each other and competed against one another, it was never at the level of twins.

Some of you here today are likely twins, or have siblings, children, grandchildren, friends or neighbors that are twins. I remember playing youth soccer with two brothers who were like twin Energizer bunnies on the field: up close I could tell them apart but on the field, opponents often thought they had double vision. My sons have two sets of twin cousins. Even at young ages, you could sense in them that there was a type of connection that goes beyond the typical bond between siblings. Seemingly from birth, they could communicate in ways that were hard to comprehend. They were and may forever be known through each other. By nature and nurture, they are linked together. And yet, there are ways that twins seek to distinguish themselves from one another. Their differences in personality and temperament are in some ways magnified because of their close bond.

Thomas, the disciple who forever will be remembered as the doubter, is also identified in scripture as *Didymus*: Greek for “the twin.” Whose twin he was, the gospel writers do not say. Maybe among the early followers of Jesus, that was already known. But because we are not told who Thomas was linked to as a twin, maybe we are to assume that his link somehow is with us: those others who also have not seen and yet believe.

Likely you have heard this story before; how Jesus appeared to the disciples who were locked behind closed doors on the night of the resurrection, hidden because of their fear for what the Jewish leaders might do to them, or how the people in Jerusalem might react to claims that Jesus had risen from the grave. Though locked in, they could not hide from the presence of God who – through the resurrected Son – came again to be with them.

Thomas, of course, was not there that night. Why that is, we are not told. Maybe he was out looking for Jesus, intent on seeing for himself what Mary of Magdala had claimed, that Jesus was alive and intent on finding them. Thomas wanted to touch the wounds of Jesus, to be given first-hand evidence that what the others claimed to have experienced was real for him too.

And so, for one week, Thomas found himself in the same place that many of us also find ourselves: asked to believe the testimony of others without any proof. Asked by others – maybe even by his own twin – whether he really believed, Thomas was honest enough to admit that he had doubts; that he wanted more proof.

When I was younger, I had my share of doubts. And this is how I would put God to the test; I would stand in my driveway with a basketball and make a silent pact with God that if he was really listening to me, and wanted to prove to me that he existed, then he would give me the power to hit ten straight free throws, and if ten then why not twenty? And if he could help me to hit free throws, he could give me the ability to jump high enough to touch the net, and then why not the base of the backboard or even the rim?

In a way, I was asking God to prove himself to me by making me superhuman. I wanted to have a perfect shot, a perfect game. What did I think I needed to erase my doubts? I thought that I should be more important than anyone else to God. If God could help me rise above the failures of missed shots and mediocre jumping ability, then surely God could help me to rise above the challenges I might face in school, in relationships, and in life. “If you do this for me,” I was proposing to God, “then I will believe.”

I sense that is something like what Thomas was thinking when he gathered one week later with the disciples and Jesus appeared again. Like he had done previously, the risen Jesus greets his followers saying, “peace be with you,” the ancient Hebrew promise that God will bring harmony to that which is chaotic,

unity to that which has been scattered.¹ This is peace in its full and eternal sense, the wholeness of being accepted by and identified with Christ.

Immediately, it seems, Jesus turned and addressed Thomas; offering him the chance to touch the wounds on his hand and side. It was as if Jesus was saying, “take the proof that you have been wanting to have, so that your unbelief might turn into belief.” Surprisingly, though, Thomas does not reach out to touch him – he had said that he need to, but in the end does not. Did he forget? Was he grossed out by the sight of the wounds? Or did Thomas finally realize that it was not necessary for him to touch it; for what proof would it have provided him?

I think what Thomas realized that day, which he had not understood a week earlier, was that he had been given all the proof he needed through the testimony of the other disciples. They had told him that Jesus could pass through even locked doors, and they had been right. They had told Thomas that when he appeared he was not angry with them for having locked themselves in a room – had not condemned them for being fearful and insecure – but had blessed them with the assurance that God’s peace was with them. Jesus had not judged them based on the merit of their actions, but had come to them out of love. And as he had promised, Jesus had provided them the gift of the Holy Spirit. God would not only be with them once a week, or only at their gathering place, but always and in all places. Just as Jesus had told them before he had died, the grace of God did not disappear with his death, but increased. Through these resurrection stories, “John’s gospel names the disciples’ fears, and in the face of those fears, Jesus’ grace increases.”²

On those two Sunday evenings immediately following the resurrection, the disciples have their first experience with the Holy Spirit. In a clear reference to the creation story in Genesis, they receive from Jesus the breath of God which fills them with life. No longer is there any need to bargain with God to make them superhuman, because the incarnation of God – which walked alongside them in the form of Jesus – was now living inside of them. And that breath of God which entered the first disciples is shared through story: the testimony of those who witnessed the risen Christ with those who have not seen, and yet because God is incarnated in the Christ the Word, even to this day can believe; without needing to touch the wounds to know it is true.

¹ Alberto Garcia in *Lectionary Homiletics*, April-May, 2003

² Gail O’Day in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 2

And so, let us pay attention to what it is the risen Jesus instructs these disciples to do now that the Holy Spirit has been breathed into them. First, Jesus says, “as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” No longer are they just disciples – followers of Christ – but also apostles – sent out by Christ. Their commission is to tell the story of God’s grace made known in Jesus and now magnified by the resurrection. That is one of the reasons that we organize our church activities by commissions: groups that are dedicated to the task of telling the story of God’s grace whether through worship planning or buildings and grounds maintenance or mission giving or fellowship or membership or any of the other ways the church proclaims the risen and living Christ. Tell the story, Jesus charges them, so that people in all places and generations might come to know not by seeing, but by hearing and believing.

The second instruction that Jesus gives them concerns forgiveness. It is through the act of forgiveness that we allow the story of the resurrection to become manifest in the lives of those who hear the story. These new apostles of Jesus are not called to produce forgiveness, for it has already been produced on the cross. The redemption of sins has already been accomplished. Our job, as heirs of the apostles, is to proclaim to others that forgiveness is available to them, and to us. As long as we hold on to the sins of this world – those that we have participated in as well as those that take place around us – none of us are truly free. As Lewis Smedes says, “when you forgive, you set a prisoner free. And then you discover that the prisoner was you.”³

For the week following Easter, Thomas, the Twin, was held captive by the need that he thought he had for physical proof of the resurrection. What he discovered, by experiencing the presence of Christ in the midst of his fellow believers, was that his doubts had been holding him captive. We have much in common with Thomas, that he could almost be our twin: for we put God to the test and desire to be lifted above the uncertainty and fear that comes to us in this life. We feel that we must gain some superhuman ability to forgive others, while we ourselves remain the captives. Let it go, Jesus tells us instead; believe instead that God has the power to forgive all things – no matter what it is that we have done or not done, or that has been done to us. Let it go and proclaim that the proof of the resurrection rests in the forgiveness that has been granted to us through Christ.

“Blessed are those,” and here Jesus speaks to us even in our times of doubt, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” AMEN.

³ As quoted by Craig Barnes in “Crying Shame”