

April 23, 2017 – Second Sunday of Easter
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 20: 19-31

Easter Two

Both basketball hoops at the Gym are fixed! Why am I telling you this in a sermon? Bear with me, this does relate to the gospel for today. In our ongoing project of fixing up the church gym (that building diagonally across the street), way back in August we took down the false ceiling inside of the gym. The ceiling was falling down anyway and, frankly, it was ugly as sin. We took the false ceiling down and oohed and ahed at the wood that had been locked behind it, that seemed to appear almost miraculously. Then we realized that by removing the ceiling we had also compromised the structural integrity of the basketball hoops, which were in some ways attached to that ceiling and so now needed reattachment and reinforcement—a project that became the bane of my existence. I'm not going to bore you with the details and delays, and I apologize to anyone who at some point in the past nine months inquired about how the hoops were coming along and got a testy response from me. I say all of this to explain why, about a week ago, when I was told a date when the final hoop work was scheduled to happen, finally, when I was told that the hoops would be fixed, I did not rejoice. At our church staff meeting I said, "I'm not going to believe that that hoop is in until I see it with my own eyes, touch it! Very Thomas-like of me, right?"

That's our story today, not the story of the basketball hoops, the story in which Thomas will not believe until he sees, touches for himself. In fact, this story of Thomas is fixed for today, is always scheduled for the Sunday right after Easter. Easter Two. Which is to say, after a wonderful Sunday of streamers and dancers and trumpets and a full house, we have a Sunday which usually has a few less people in church, and which features a gospel story of trepidation and cynicism, a story of fearful disciples, including Thomas, who is specifically named, and his memorable line. That's not Thomas's only line in the Bible, but because of this story, he gets another name, or title, or maybe prefix, he's not just Thomas, he's Doubting Thomas.

But this is not how the gospel identifies Thomas. Here, and in another story as well, the gospel doesn't give Thomas a prefix, it gives him a suffix. Here and in another place the gospel identifies him as "Thomas, who was called the Twin." This Easter Two, I've been thinking about that twin aspect of Thomas. We have some twins in our church, some who are just a few years old, and I know at least two long time members who are a twin. And then a couple weeks ago an old friend of mine came to visit, with her family, which includes a set of twin boys. She and I became close when we lived close to one another, down in Hyde Park. Then she moved to Madison, and then I moved up here. While she was back visiting Chicago, I asked if she reconnected with others in the old neighborhood. She said she also got together with another woman, whom I did not know, who also had twins—my friend became something of a twins mentor, a twins encourager down in Hyde Park. My friend said she got to know this other woman "when that woman's twins weren't yet one year old, and she couldn't yet get out of the house." I think that line speaks volumes, "she couldn't yet get out of the house." Twins can do that, as can other things in life. Anxiety. Illness. Depression. Job loss. Loss of loved ones.

That's where we find the disciples in today's gospel. They can't yet get out of the house. That's how the gospel story begins. Actually, today's gospel begins last week, on Easter Sunday, on that triumphant day, that's what is meant by the first line of today's gospel story,

“When it was evening on that day.” It is Easter Sunday, evening, and the disciples are locked inside a house, locked in fear. And then the risen Jesus appears to them, and they rejoice, and Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them. They get all of that—and they tell all of that, with excitement and conviction, to Thomas, who was called the Twin, who, it turns out, wasn’t there when this happened. Thomas hears what they have to say and he has as much confidence in Jesus as I did in the Gym. And then the gospel story continues. Now it’s one week later (i.e. today). Now Thomas is with all of the other unnamed disciples who have already seen the risen Jesus and received the Holy Spirit, that all happened a week ago. And where are they all now? Thomas and the disciples who saw Jesus and received the Holy Spirit? They are all still in the house. They can’t yet get out of it. Clearly, Thomas was not the only one having trouble believing.

But if Thomas is going to be singled out for doubting, I think we’d do well also to remember that he is a twin. I say this, because I think doubt might be a twin—a twin of belief, a close sibling of it. For those first disciples, doubt and belief were very close. Not identical, as even identical twins are not, but sharing much of the same material, and working through many of the same experiences. I recently heard a radio interview with a physicist who is twin, she says that it’s a key part of her identity—as different as she is from her twin, who is an artist. The physicist describes their relationship in this way: “Being a twin is like being married from the moment of conception with no possibility of divorce.” I thought that was a memorable line, too, and maybe opens up our understanding of doubt and belief. They are together from the beginning, always will be in some way. Different as they are, there is also a connection to them. And so, as any parent of twins knows, as any parent of more than one child knows, instead of placing these two in opposition to one another, comparing them and favoring one—instead, we love them both, differently. Jesus loved Thomas, even as he doubted, Jesus appeared to him, encouraged him, helped him get out of the house.

So also we can think of belief and doubt as close siblings, members of a family, of a collection of disciples, of a congregation. As a congregation we affirm the collective identify of belief every Sunday when we say the creed. It’s important to note this about the creeds, that they are community statements, because there can be this idea that creeds are some sort of individual, spiritual litmus test, as if the validity of the creed depends upon the faith of the person saying it. But the very first word of the Nicene Creed completely dispels this. The Nicene Creed, the creed we say during the Easter season, begins with “we.” “We believe.” Within that “we” there is much variation, from one person to another, much variation within one person from one week to the next. As the late, great church historian Jaraslov Pelikan said of the creeds “I’m not asked on a Sunday morning, as of 11:08, what do you believe?” No, the creeds are affirmations that one is part of a community which for a millennium and a half has said, “We believe in one God.” We believe in things seen and unseen, that one God made them all, and was made known in one Lord, and is still breathing the Spirit of life and faith into this world, into us all.

Thomas had his doubts, but he was not the proverbial evil twin. In fact, though Thomas is called the Twin, in the Bible there is never any mention of his sibling, identical or fraternal. So it is, I think, that if doubt is a twin to belief, it is a double identity that Thomas himself has, a double identity that each of us have. We can all doubt; no doubt we all will. We can also say, with Thomas, something else he says, “My Lord and my God.”