

May 14, 2017 – Fifth Sunday of Easter, Mother’s Day
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 14:1-12

Thomas’s Secret Hobby

Thomas has something to say in today's gospel reading. It’s probably not his most famous line—that would be the one about his difficulty believing, that line that earns him the nickname “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas is not alone in this—in his doubts. Thomas is not alone on many levels, including from conception, including in the womb. As the Bible notes in other places, he is Thomas, the Twin. I extend my admiration to his mother, this Mother’s Day.

I suspect Thomas might have been something of a difficult child—if his comments as an adult are any indication. There’s not just his assertion about seeing and believing—that takes place post-resurrection. But the Bible also records various other lines from Thomas at various other points, and many, I dare say most, make him sound a bit like Eeyore. You know Eeyore, from Winnie the Pooh, remember what he’s like? Perpetually pessimistic, dismal, gloomy. Thomas can sound a bit like that, or even like Eeyore with an edge, Eeyore gone gritty. You remember what kind of animal Eeyore is, right? That’s Thomas: the wise—donkey.

Take today’s line—a line that cuts through comforting assurances about where Jesus is going and asks: how you are supposed to Mapquest that?! I’m getting ahead of myself, though, first we should set the scene. Although we are in the Easter season, today’s gospel reading takes place before that, before the cross, takes place the night before Jesus died, in the Upper Room. Jesus has just shared a last supper with his disciples, and washed their feet, giving them an example of how they are to treat one another, serve one another, love one another. Now he gives them final instructions, a farewell discourse. Jesus speaks words of confidence and encouragement, “Do not let your hearts be troubled...” Jesus speaks of a place that he is going, that they too will be going. And it is now that Thomas says—and I can only imagine that Thomas says this with a dubious inflection, or even, I think, with a deadpan and yet pointed tone: "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Another reason to call him Doubting Thomas? Some may say so, but I think it tells us Thomas’s secret hobby. I think here we learn that he is also: Aspiring Playwright Thomas. I think that from this line, we can infer that that’s who he really is, Aspiring Playwright Thomas. That when other disciples were watching the Transfiguration, or jostling for position at Jesus’ right or left hand, or getting Jesus a donkey, at all those times I think Thomas was off dreaming up sets and scribbling dialogue. You doubt me? Here’s why: I have this on good authority, from a friend who studied playwriting in graduate school at NYU, my friend said that the most important thing he learned in playwriting school was this: If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up somewhere else.

If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up somewhere else. Thomas, clearly, has heard this advice, has taken it to heart. Thomas knows that you should know where you are going. And so when Jesus begins his great soliloquy about the place where he is going, Thomas’s ears perk up. But then, Thomas thinks, Jesus goes off-script. So Thomas interrupts, asks, "Jesus, where are you going?" and Jesus says, "Where? I am the way."

Thomas wants to know where, Jesus talks about the way. Thomas is concerned with destination; Jesus is talking about means, method, mode. Now Thomas isn't the only one who misses the way for the where, who gets caught up in thinking that the point of Christian life is all

about getting to a certain place. This gospel reading itself is sometimes interpreted in that way. This gospel reading is not so much famous because of Thomas, but because of funerals, where, when it is often read. It is a gospel reading about Jesus facing death, and offering comfort and confident promise—and so it is good and right to read it at those times.

But that is not the only time the gospel has in mind. The comfort that Jesus offers, what he faces and what he promises, is much more than just in the sweet bye and bye. Following Jesus, being a disciple is not just a speculative investment in ethereal real estate. Perhaps we have taken the phrase, “dwelling places” to mean something filmy and far flung, mansions in the sky, but that’s not the only meaning of the word dwelling. Dwelling is not just a noun, it’s a verb. Dwelling is just not a destination; dwelling is something you do. Especially in the gospel of John, dwelling is not a place, it is a present experience. As this gospel tells us in the very beginning, Jesus is the word that became flesh, and dwelt among us. Jesus is the dwelling of God, on earth, with us.

Or we could say, with Thomas’s secret hobby in mind, using a term from the world of theater, we could say that in Jesus, God is the ultimate Method Actor. You may have heard of this dramatic technique, Method Acting, made famous by Marlon Brando. In Method Acting, the actor seeks to understand the character he or she is playing by entering as deeply as possible into it, and sustaining this understanding beyond the usual confines of their craft. So, for instance, if they’re preparing to play a recluse, they may shut themselves away from others. Or if they’re playing someone from another country, they may speak with that accent off set, beyond rehearsals. We could say that in becoming a human being, in dwelling among us, God embraces Method Acting to the fullest possible extent. In Jesus, God embraces humanity to the fullest possible extent, even to and past the point of death.

“You can do this, too,” Jesus says. That’s what Jesus says to Thomas, in the gospel today. We have in Jesus a model of life lived in perfect unity with the Father. We who would be disciples are invited to take on that same character, the character of Christ, to be imitators of Christ, Method Actors of Christ. Following Jesus’ cue, we can break bread together, pray together, encourage one another, offer ourselves in service for one another, be so caught up in this method of action that where we are, there he is also.

That’s what Jesus says in the gospel today—and then he says something yet more incredible. What Jesus says next is, I think, one of the most shocking things in all of the Bible. Jesus says to his dubious disciples, to the Eeyores and the *donkeys,* to every one of us, Jesus says of Method Actors, “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these.” Greater works?! Yes, Jesus says to Thomas, the Aspiring Playwright, and to us: “Yes. You are the Second Act.”

Alleluia and Amen.