

**Sermon for St. Matthew's, Pennington**  
**Second Sunday of Easter, 3rd April, 2016**  
**The Reverend Joan Fleming**

*We are witnesses to these things ...*

Readings:

Acts 5: 27-32

Revelation 1: 4-8

John 20: 19-31

You have to feel for Thomas—Thomas, presented in John's gospel as odd man out among the disciples, the only one who missed the amazing moment when the Master suddenly, miraculously stood with them again; missed those first heart-stopping words of reassurance from the risen Lord, "Peace be with you;" missed the privilege of being shown Jesus' wounds, still raw from the nails and the spear; and missed the even higher privilege of receiving the Holy Spirit and being commissioned to bear the Father's message of forgiveness to a hurting world.

You also have to wonder about Thomas—why is he singled out by the author of the Fourth Gospel for such special scrutiny, and treated with a subtle kind of ambivalence? Questions accumulate as we read over this story in today's gospel: Where was Thomas when news of Jesus' empty tomb broke? How could he have missed hearing it? Why wasn't he holed up with the other disciples that evening? Then there's that curious little detail: Why are we told that he was called "the Twin"?

I suspect that you, like me, may feel a certain affinity, an instinctive sympathy with Thomas—for Thomas after all is a kind of Everyman figure who rather reminds us ... well, of ourselves. Like him, many of us also are skeptical; we want evidence before we commit, preferably the evidence of our own eyes; because other peoples' experience—third-party testimony—feels somehow insufficient.

As Marilynne Robinson remarks [in her new collection of essays, *The Givenness of Things*], "all we really know comes from our own [necessarily limited] experience," which means that humility is at all times an attitude appropriate to human beings. For the fact is that we do take other peoples' testimony to be reliable in a myriad ways:

Few of us are astronomers or cosmologists, or even mathematically literate to a level that permits us to make our own assessment of black holes, gravitational waves or the possibility of life on other planets. Yet we believe what the scientists are telling us about the mysterious marvels that are out there, even though our direct experience of the cosmos we inhabit cannot amount to more than a minute fraction of the whole.

To quote Robinson again, “Cosmic and microcosmic being are so glorious and strange that nothing marvelous can be excluded on the grounds of improbability ...”

I find this a very liberating line of thought as I contemplate the glorious strangeness of the Resurrection, which to my mind is both highly improbable (on “scientific” grounds) and yet irrefutable (in view of its consequences). Perhaps the reason this author holds such appeal for me is that Marilynne Robinson liberates me *from* dogmatic assertion, from “must” and “should”, and liberates me *into* hope, joy and possibility.

Here is a passage from her first novel, *Housekeeping*, a curious fiction tinged with magical realism, in which theology mingles with imagination, and leaves one convinced that no line of thought is barred to one in search of the truth.

*Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it ... While [God] was on earth He mended families. He gave Lazarus back to his mother, and to the centurion he gave his daughter again. ... Being man He felt the pull of death, and being God He must have wondered more than we do what it would be like. He is known to have walked upon water, but He was not born to drown. And when He did die it was sad—such a young man, so full of promise, and His mother wept and His friends could not believe the loss, and the story spread everywhere and the mourning would not be comforted, until He was so sharply lacked and so powerfully remembered that his friends felt Him beside them as they walked along the road, and saw someone cooking fish on the shore and knew it to be Him, and sat down to supper with Him, all wounded as He was.*

In the early days of what Michael Curry, our new Presiding Bishop, loves to call the Jesus Movement, no line of thought was barred. Christianity as we know it had a period of what you might call gestation, during which a consensus slowly developed out of an astonishingly varied mix of memories, legends, convictions, interpretations and claims about Jesus' identity, his teaching and his intentions for his followers.

It took almost two hundred years for that consensus to crystallize into orthodox (lower-case "o") Christianity. We are familiar with only the four "canonical" Gospels, the finalists in what had become an astonishingly crowded field of contenders. Certain of the Church Fathers, who served, one might say, as referees in the vital work of judging the competitors, mentioned various other gospels—such as the Gospel of Philip, the Secret Book of James, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene—but they did so only to dismiss most of them as worthless. Indeed it was only with the discovery in 1945 of the texts hidden near Nag Hammadi almost two thousand years ago, and miraculously preserved in the desert sands, that we have been able to read many of those forbidden writings for ourselves. The champions of orthodoxy were determined to keep deviant teachings out of circulation: those they sought to destroy survived only because the partisan faithful who treasured them did whatever they could to preserve them.

Among the texts that came to light in 1945 is that of the *Gospel of Thomas*. It is not a narrative of Jesus' life, but a compilation of his "sayings." Astonishingly, this new/old text has given scholars an entirely fresh insight (a "back door"?) into the unique witness of John's Gospel, access into how its author's mind was working as he shaped his narrative and chose the themes he determined to promote.

Writing about 60 years after Jesus' execution, he sought to clear the field of the conflicting factions and splinter groups within the Jesus Movement that threatened to dissipate the enormous spiritual energy released at Pentecost. Competing voices [remember Paul's complaint in I Corinthians 1 that Christians in Corinth were claiming to "belong" to whoever had baptized them?] were already causing confusion, and there was urgent need to establish one clear account of who Jesus was and what He had accomplished through his passion, death and resurrection.

We'll compare how two themes, of "light" and of "the kingdom," are treated by John and by Thomas, and how their treatments differ.

In the majestic prologue to his gospel John identifies Jesus as the primordial, creative energy, the Word or Logos through which all things came to be—and identifies the human Jesus with the divine, "true light, which enlightens everyone." Tragically, the world neither knew nor welcomed him. Accordingly, we must look exclusively to Jesus for enlightenment because Jesus *alone* is the bearer of the divine light.

In contrast, the Jesus of Thomas's gospel instructs his disciples to look, not to himself as the only source of enlightenment, but within ... to *themselves*. Thomas agrees with John that Jesus as the primordial light brought the entire universe into being, but he insists that this light indwells everything we see and touch: "Split a piece of wood, and I am there; lift up the stone, and you will find me." But this light also dwells within ourselves, so Jesus instructs his disciples, "If they say to you, 'Where did you come from?' Say to them, 'We came from the light, the place where the light came into being' ... "

Professor Elaine Pagels [in *Beyond Belief*] remarks of this passage that the Jesus in Thomas' Gospel "redirects the disciples from himself toward the light hidden within each person."

John's teaching about the kingdom, interestingly, is more similar to that of Thomas than to the apocalyptic future kingdom of the Synoptics: both John and Thomas insist that the Kingdom of God is spiritually present, here and now—for John, in the person of Christ; but for Thomas, in the world around and within us: "The Kingdom is inside you, and outside you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will see that it is you who are the children of the living Father."

Thomas's Gospel emphasizes our common humanity with Jesus and his gospel's extraordinary conclusion takes this thought even further, beyond affinity to actual identity. "Jesus said, 'Whoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and I myself will become that person, and the mysteries shall be revealed to him.'" Pagels sees this as the origin of Thomas being named "the Twin," a term that John may be citing with a hint of sarcasm in today's gospel reading.

Even as we shout in triumph, *Alleluia, Christ is risen!* we cannot afford to forget that Christ's resurrection is also ours. On this "Low Sunday" when the finger is pointed at Thomas "the Doubter" let us also celebrate the resurrection of Thomas's own gospel, so long hidden in its

desert tomb, but now liberated and ready to be claimed as yet another witness in the ongoing Jesus Movement.