

Reflections on the Lessons for Second Easter

Thomas, who we meet in John's gospel, is one of the more interesting and human figures in the New Testament. He is often derided for doubting the resurrection stories the others have told him, so much so that he is known as "doubting Thomas." Of course, many have doubted these stories, both then and now. Yet when he is reunited with Christ, as shown in the statue below, he becomes a pivotal figure in the story of Jesus.

When Thomas meets the risen Christ, he exclaims in 20:28, "My Lord and my God!" This is perhaps the most clear confession of Jesus' identity in the whole of the New Testament. It is certainly the high point of John's gospel. John's gospel begins with the opening hymn, where we learn that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The rest of the gospel might be seen as a sustained argument that this statement is true and simultaneously as an exposition as to what that means for our lives. When Thomas meets the risen Christ, he knows who it is he is meeting and what it means for his life: "My Lord and my God!" Jesus of Nazareth is the Word made flesh who dwelt among us.

According to extra-Biblical tradition, Thomas then lived a life of apostleship, meaning that he was sent to proclaim the news of Jesus Christ. According to Christians in India, he made it there by AD 52 and he was killed in AD 72.

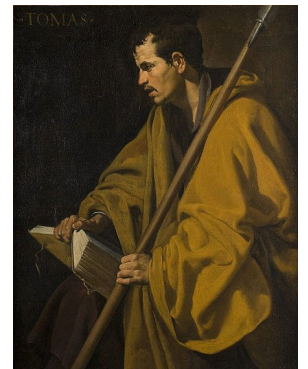
I remember working with a fellow Purdue graduate who was from India. When people would ask Samy where he was from, he would reply that he was from the region of India where they killed Thomas.

In John 20:29 Jesus pronounces us particularly blessed: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The first generation of Christians are important because it is through their testimony that later Christians came to believe in the story of Christ. Yet the New Testament scholar C. K. Barrett observes that there is a tension between two different ideas in John's gospel, the strength of the first generation found in the witness they give, yet their weakness because resurrection appearances were necessary before they could give witness. They should have believed based on "...the word of God in the Old Testament and the word spoken by Jesus."

The story of Thomas invites reflection on the meaning of faith for the Christian life. The word faith is used throughout the New Testament, and closely related words for it are also found in John's gospel. Words such as "seeing" and "knowing." A first reading of the New Testament would suggest that faith is our response to God's actions. But a more careful study of the gospel finds that world is pulled in two opposing



Reunion - Thomas and Christ, by Ernst Barlach.



Saint Thomas the Apostle, Diego Velázquez, 1619

directions; toward the light of Christ and toward darkness. We are told that people love darkness more than light (John 3:19). Sin is what my colleague Joe Burgess describes as “an absolutely serious problem.” In 8:34 we learn “...that everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”

In John 6:44 Jesus tells his disciples (and us): “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them.” The unmistakable conclusion that comes from combining the passages on sin with John 6:44 is that faith is a gift of God, given to people who would prefer to remain in the darkness. We learn from the stories of Thomas and the later Christians that God gives faith how he deems best, sometimes through the resurrection appearances, sometimes through the testimony of the first apostles, sometimes through the Bible and the proclaimed word.

The lessons for the Second Sunday of Easter are:

- **First reading**
 - Acts 2:14a, 22-32
- **Psalm**
 - Psalm 16
- **Second reading**
 - 1 Peter 1:3-9
- **Gospel**
 - John 20:19-31

They can be found at <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>, biblegateway.com, or lectionary.com.