

Odd Man Out – Brian Hartley

1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

My name is Brian Thomas. I was named after my grandfather, Thomas Price, who was named after his grandfather, Nathan Thomas (whose DNA, I might point out, is sprinkled rather liberally throughout this congregation). Today, I have a grandson named after me: Roran Thomas. And I—we—are here this morning to lay claim to our apostolic forebear and to suggest that the one often dubbed “doubting Thomas” has gotten a bum rap throughout history.

I would remind those of you who have already forgotten that it was this same Thomas who, upon hearing that Jesus was headed back to Judea, in chapter 11 of this same gospel, proclaimed that he was ready to go and die beside his master. And then, in chapter 14, in that passage where Jesus says that he is *the way, the truth, and the life*, which we love to quote so much, it is only Thomas who has the audacity to say out loud what everybody else is thinking but won't say: *Lord, I don't know where you are going. How am I supposed to find the way?* Without Thomas's honesty, American evangelicals might not even have one of their favorite Jesus' I AM statements!

As Martha Spong writes so eloquently in a recent Christian Century article (“Thomas Speaks from the Gut,” April 6, 2015), Thomas' problem is neither a lack of desire or courage. In fact, he is queuing up to follow Jesus when others are hedging their bets. He is the guy, she maintains, whose chief trait is loyalty. (In fact, C. K. Barrett defines him as “loyal and obtuse.”) He is the person you want on the team because he will have the audacity to lead others without thinking twice. Strong and instinctive, Thomas operates neither from the head or the heart, but from the gut.

So in today's story, the third time that Thomas appears in this gospel, his voice cannot be heard because he is simply not there. We don't know why he isn't present. All we do know is that all of the other disciples are portrayed as huddling in fear, behind closed doors. Maybe that wasn't Thomas's way. Maybe this dude who had said he would follow Jesus to the death is royally pissed-off at the world, or at least the Romans, and is out there looking to give them a piece of his best rhetoric. Maybe with Jesus now dead, he figures he has nothing to lose. We just don't know. All we do know is that, this time, Thomas, perhaps Jesus' most loyal and outspoken disciple, is not with all the other disciples when Jesus appears. And, because Thomas is Thomas and operates from the gut, because he reacts from instinct, he says it couldn't have happened the way everybody else says. A maverick by nature, unafraid to be the lone voice no matter what the consequences, he blurts out, *Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.* In short, Thomas is not afraid to be the odd man out.

You see, Thomas' problem is not so much one of doubting as it is one of blurting. As Spong suggests, “He says things that nobody dares to say,” and, by so doing, “he creates tension not only in the Upper Room with the other disciples, but down across the centuries as we take his story apart and put it back together.” This I understand, because my name is Brian Thomas, and I am a blurter. I oftentimes say things I shouldn't in pleasant company and then spend the rest of

the day wishing I hadn't. (Last week I told my Western Christianity class that Empress Eudoxia was emasculating her husband, the emperor, Arcadius, who didn't "have the balls" to stand up to her and defend his firebrand preacher, John Chrysostom.) For blurters, such things just tumble out of our mouths without even thinking.

Frederick Buechner claims that behind Thomas's blurring stood the fact that he was a realist. "Imagination was not Thomas's long suit. He called a spade a spade. He didn't believe in fairy tales, and if anything else came up that he didn't believe in or couldn't understand, his questions could be pretty direct... When Jesus told Thomas he was the way, you can't help but think that Thomas was somewhat disappointed. Jesus wasn't a way, he was a man, and it was too bad he so often insisted on talking in riddles." (*Peculiar Treasures*, 165) Thomas's struggles were not simply his own, the gospel writer seems to suggest, but they stand at the heart of the Easter faith: How is it that we come to believe in the risen Christ? How do we move from the Christ of the cross to the resurrected Jesus?

In John's gospel, Thomas's story is but one of four resurrection stories that we get here in rapid succession. In the case of the Beloved Disciple, it is seeing the burial wrappings that moves him to faith. For Mary Magdalene, seeing is not enough. For her, it takes Jesus' calling her by name. Hearing becomes her means of faith. And then we have these huddled disciples, who see and believe when Jesus manages to get through their impregnable locked doors. This miraculous ability of Christ's resurrected body moves them to belief. But Thomas will not be content without his own experience.

We must understand here that the Evangelist has his own audience for whom he is writing near the end of the first century. As he says later, he has carefully chosen the scenes for his narrative in order to convince those who are listening in and who haven't been privy to the life of Christ. Among this audience, there are probably more than a few "doubting Thomases." They, too, are not content with a substituted or spiritual body. They want to see and to touch—something which, by the way, the Evangelist suggests the real Thomas never does. For him, sight, inevitably, proved sufficient.

But now that generation of eyewitnesses, the ones to whom the apostle Paul refers in his letters, are passing away. They had served as the crucial link between the ministry of Jesus and the launch of the nascent church. They had lived through what the Evangelist in his gospel labels as "signs," and had gone forth to proclaim the word. They, as this passage suggests, had been breathed upon by the risen Lord, just as the first Adam had been breathed on, and they had gone forth to preach the Good News.

It is their experience which frames the prologue to today's epistolary lesson. They are those who declare, *What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands*. And they are the ones who set forth the one who was revealed, who was seen, who was testified to, and who is now declared. What they experienced is retold each and every time the people of God come together to worship. For, if you pay close attention to today's gospel text, you will see that it narrates the movement of worship: from the assembly of the disciples on the Lord's Day, to the blessing being given, the absolution pronounced, to the celebration of the risen Lord through His real presence, concluding with confession of him as

Lord and God, and then being sent forth for service. These “marks” of the gospel narrative provide us with clear liturgical action.

But these texts, while serving an apologetic purpose, also provide an invitation to those of us in the audience to join the story ourselves, from a very different vantage point. For those of you familiar with theatre techniques, I would posit that the ending here of chapter twenty is a bit like that provided us by Shakespeare in Act 5, scene 1, of Midsummer Night's Dream, when the character of Puck turns to address those in the shadows directly. “If we shadows have offended, think but this and all is mended, that you have but slumber'd here while these visions did appear.” In like manner, the gospel writer inserts himself in the closing lines of today's text to tell us something about his style and pedagogical purpose. He admits that the construction of his narrative is both limited and selective. But, he suggests, his primary purpose has been evangelistic. That is, this is not meant to be some objective chronological biography. It is blatantly theological and missiological.

And seated in those shadows are the original hearers fifty or more years removed from the evangelist's chronicle. Theirs is a new world in which they have experienced the crumbling of Jerusalem beneath the foot of Tiberius and the might of Rome's military machine. The late great Johannine scholar, Raymond E. Brown, believes that they are a part of a Jewish community now expelled from the synagogue and trying to live lives of faithfulness in the pagan urban centers of Asia Minor. Who are they? Cut off from their Jewish identity, having to make difficult choices in the cesspool of Roman urbanity, and now losing their trusted voice or voices of the apostolic generation, they are perhaps longing for the “good old days” when Jesus could be experienced first-hand.

But here, at the end of the gospel, the theatre lights go up before the curtain comes down; they are reminded that the era of signs has passed and that the living Christ, present through the power of the Spirit breathed upon the disciples, is now to be shared with the next generation that hovers just beyond the Klieg lights. And now we have joined them, and perhaps, we, too, sometimes are tempted to long for living “back in the day” of our ancestors—a time we think, somewhat nostalgically, was simpler and better, a time when God was somehow more real and more present, a time when we could allow our Thomas-side to at last be satisfied.

I must admit to falling prey to this myth too often myself. The pulpiteers who formed me have now mostly passed from the scene—Gardner Taylor dying on Easter Sunday, shortly after the Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock. Many of my friends are retiring this year, while others, like our good friend, Dr. Dunnington, will soon be leaving us. It is tempting at such times to slip into curmudgeonly mode and to complain about the sins of the next generation. Give me the old time religion—simply let me experience the risen Lord on terms which I demand and can understand!

On Good Friday, my wife and I joined our daughter and son-in-law for a wedding in St. Louis. It was a bittersweet moment, because I was remembering officiating at James and Jaime's wedding right here less than a decade ago. They had met here at Greenville College, sung in choir together, and fallen in love—like so many others before them. Jaime had suffered from the onset of terrible seizures. And, showering in preparation for a friend's wedding in Washington, DC, she had fallen, hit her head, and expired. Her loss was traumatic and our hearts broke for the

quiet young widower who had cared so faithfully for his sick young wife. Now, years have gone by, and on Good Friday we gathered to witness James and Rebekah's wedding. We were happy for both of them, but we also remembered that day when another wedding had been celebrated, as well.

Moving on can be hard—whether it is from a tragic loss or after a traumatic experience such as the passing of a previous generation. But the good news of this season is that life comes from death and that we are now the ones on whom the Spirit has breathed. And, today, we have the combined witness of two generations that the risen Christ is sufficient to sustain us through times of trial and change. In fact, according to legend, Thomas, the “odd man out,” went on to carry the gospel to the people of India—a people from whom I received great honor last year, thanks, at least in part, to my name. Now here we are, less than sixty generations from those first witnesses. Though we have not been privileged to see directly the risen Christ, we have been privileged to experience the Spirit-filled community whose task it is to continue to witness to the risen Christ. And so, we join with them today to say, “Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!”