

Sermon, April 19, 2020

Good morning. We are here again. Thanks for joining us. Last week I thanked a lot of people for what they are stepping up and doing during this coronavirus crisis. Today I want to include Kathy Johnson, who has been recording and posting these on-line services for us, as well as linking them to our Facebook page. And also Marty Reisinger who has been posting sermon manuscripts and links on our webpage. And also today thanks to Nan Gangler, who is providing a couple of songs for us on hammered dulcimer. I'd like to be able to tell you when things can get back to normal around here. But have to admit I have no idea. In the meantime, let's all be safe. If you need something or just want to chat, call me or email me any time.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty and eternal God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt, may we who have not seen, have faith in you and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

The Holy Gospel of the lord, according to John, the twentieth chapter.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

I have a friend who thinks scripture really isn't all that relevant here two thousand years after the first Easter and half a world away. I'd like to remind him of today's gospel story, where a group of faithful frightened people have locked themselves inside, out of fear for what's going on outside.

That's pretty much what you and I and most citizens of our entire county and country and much of the world are doing right now, isn't it?

Today is the second Sunday of Easter, otherwise known as “Low Sunday,” at least in the Anglican and Catholic churches. And no, despite the name, “Low” has nothing to do with typical Church attendance on the Sunday after Easter. Low Sunday marks the end of the “Octave,” or eight-day Festival of Easter that began last week, on “HIGH” Sunday. But Easter doesn’t really end today. As the highest holy celebration in the church calendar, Easter is an entire season that lasts until Pentecost, six weeks from today.

Over in the Eastern Orthodox Church they call today St. Thomas Sunday. And I can see why, because every year we read the story of Jesus and Thomas, or as some people like to call him, “Doubting Thomas.” Personally I DON’T like calling him that. Because I think Thomas has been unfairly maligned throughout Christian history, and we should spend at least part of this and every Thomas Sunday cutting him some slack. (Let’s do that!) We mentioned Thomas a few weeks ago when we read the story of Lazarus. How he and he alone was a brave and loyal disciple willing to stick with and even die along with Jesus if necessary.

But other than the few other lines he gets in the gospel of John, the only other references to Thomas in the New Testament are to his name only. Mind you, it is a distinctive name. One that was probably really a nickname, like Simon who was nicknamed Peter. In fact Thomas and Peter only became common given names because of those nicknamed Apostles.

Thomas comes from the Aramaic word “T’oma,” meaning “the twin.” The Gospel of John says Thomas was also known as $\delta\iota\delta\upsilon\mu\omicron\jmath$ or Didymas, which is the Greek word for “the twin.”

So Thomas was “the twin,” also known as “the twin.” Intuitive thinker that I am, I’m guessing he had a brother, even though the Bible never mentions him.

The non-canonical Gnostic Gospels hint that Thomas was either literally or figuratively the twin brother of Jesus, but sorry, that's just too weird for me.

The Gnostic Gospels include an ancient Gospel of Thomas, an Infancy Gospel of Thomas, an Apocalypse of Thomas and also a book called Thomas the Contender. Those are all fanciful works from the second century or later that Orthodox Christianity has never taken very seriously. There is another ancient book called the Acts of Thomas—or more correctly the Acts of Judas Thomas, which implies Judas was actually the twin's given name. (I guess if my name was Judas, I'd want a nickname too!)

The Acts of Thomas isn't so much a gospel, but more an historical novel that details the legendary travels and events of The Twin's life after Jesus ascended to heaven. Scholars say it is probably more novel than history.

It follows Thomas north into Syria and then East to Persia and later to both northern and southern India where The Twin supposedly evangelized and converted many of the Indian people.

Most scholars consider these tales dubious, including Emeritus Pope Benedict the Sixteenth in a statement he issued a few years ago. Personally, I'm not so sure.

Because I think there must be SOME reason that more than five million people in India today self-identify as St. Thomas Christians. They can tell you all about the Apostle's mission there in the year 52.

And they'll be glad to show you the ancient St. Thomas Crosses scattered around the countryside, and even give you a guided tour of St. Thomas Mount where the apostle was supposedly martyred. It is a site revered for centuries by Muslims, Hindus and Christians alike.

The Acts of Thomas says the apostle traveled to India with a companion named Abbaness--a name that could easily have been Romanized to something like Apollonius. Funny, because recently I stumbled across an interesting 3rd century writing called, "The Life of Apollonius." It's about a philosopher and charismatic itinerant preacher who, like Thomas, was also a contemporary of Jesus, and who also traveled east through Persia and on to India with a traveling companion. His travel-mate's notebook / travelogue is credited as the main source of information behind, "The Life of Apollonius."

His companion's name? Hard to say in his original language. But Greek author Philostratus thought it was something like D-a-m-i-s. Do you think 'Damis' may actually have been "Thomas?" If so, it seems once again poor Thomas hasn't been given his due.

In a nutshell, today Thomas asked for PROOF of the risen Jesus. And frankly there are times I wouldn't mind some of that myself. But in the end he was given FAITH in the risen Jesus rather than PROOF. And it turns out Faith renders PROOF totally unnecessary.

Considering myself one of those "blessed" ones to whom today's text refers—you know—"those who believe without seeing"—

all I can say is, "Thank you Jesus." And also, "Thank you Thomas." "The Twin," who was also known as, "The Twin." One good take-away from today's story is that today even though we too are locked down in fear,

the Risen Jesus can still find us, and vice versa, giving us the hope and the promise that God remains with us and things will get better.

And I could say a lot more about Thomas this morning, but there is a problem in today's reading. Near the beginning it reads, "The doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews."

Fear of the Jews? The disciples themselves WERE all Jews, and unfortunately this translation and others like it have contributed to centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. Modern scholarship suggests it should instead read, “For fear of the Judeans.” Because it was an unholy alliance of local and Roman political leaders that killed Jesus, and certainly not members of a religious group of which both the disciples and Jesus were a devoted part.

And that important point is especially fitting this morning, because sundown tomorrow evening begins a day that is quite meaningful for our Jewish brothers and sisters, and frankly I think it should be very meaningful for us as well.

The day is called Yom Hashoah in Hebrew, or more correctly, “Yom Hashoah Ve-Hagevurah”—literally the “Day of (Remembrance of) the Holocaust and the Heroism.” The observation was established by the Knesset, or Israeli Parliament in the early 1950s, and it has become a day commemorated by Jewish families, communities and individuals all over the world.

It is NOT the same as the International Holocaust Remembrance Day that the United Nations observed back in January, although the names are similar. The UN Holiday falls on the anniversary of, and is a CELEBRATION of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945.

Yom Hashoah, on the other hand, was never meant to be a celebration of anything.

It is instead a day of solemn remembrance, set aside to commemorate the six million Jews—roughly half of the world’s total Jewish population at the time-- who were tortured and starved and slaughtered in what was certainly the worst episode of man’s inhumanity to man in human history.

The date of Yom Hashoah is Nissan 27 in the Jewish calendar. That's the anniversary of the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. In all, 13,000 Jews died in the uprising alone.

50,000 survivors, including men, women and children, were shipped off to extermination camps, most notably, Treblinka. Of course Jews will be the first to acknowledge that they were not the only victims of the holocaust.

Nazi prison camps also gassed, starved, lethally-injected, shot and incinerated millions of others; like the "other-abled," Jehovah's Witnesses, the Roma (or Gypsies), the mentally ill and LGBT people; along with Poles and Slavs and what they called Asiatic-looking people. And also Communists, Socialists, Social Democrats and trade union leaders. It was a gruesome horror that transcended culture, nationality, race and religion. And of course reason.

The hideous consequence of a ghastly, appalling "us-versus—they" mentality, the likes of which this world had never seen. Estimates of the total number killed in the holocaust run as high as twenty million human beings. Who through no fault of their own, had suddenly, in the eyes of others, ceased to be human beings.

Tomorrow at sundown let us join with our Jewish brothers and sisters in promising God and each other: le-olam-lo od. Never. Again. This world remains a dangerous place with much to fear. But as fellow human beings and children of God, we should not have to fear...each other.

I will close with a prayer for Yom Hashoah written by Lord Jonathan Henry Sacks, former chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth.

Let Us Pray.

Today, on Yom HaShoah, we remember the victims of the greatest crime of man against man – the young, the old, the innocent, the million and a half children, starved, shot, given lethal injections, gassed, burned and turned to ash, because they were deemed guilty of the crime of being different.

We remember what happens when hate takes hold of the human heart and turns it to stone; what happens when victims cry for help and there is no one listening; what happens when humanity fails to recognize that those who are not in our image are none the less in God's image.

We remember and pay tribute to the survivors, who bore witness to what happened, and to the victims, so that robbed of their lives, they would not be robbed also of their deaths.

We remember and give thanks for the righteous of the nations who saved lives, often at risk of their own, teaching us how in the darkest night we can light a candle of hope.

Tomorrow, on Yom HaShoah, we call on You, Almighty God, to help us hear Your voice that says in every generation:

Do not murder.

Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.

Do not oppress the stranger.

We know that whilst we do not have the ability to change the past, we can change the future.

We know that whilst we cannot bring the dead back to life, we can ensure their memories live on and that their deaths were not in vain.

And so, on this Yom HaShoah, we commit ourselves to one simple act: Yizkor. Remember.

May the souls of the victims be bound in the bond of everlasting life.
Amen.