

Our Patron Saint--Thomas
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: April 12, 2015

14:19

“Our Patron Saint—Thomas” Pilgrim Church UCC, April 12, 2015—Second Sunday of Easter
(John 20:19-31)

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, if the United Church of Christ had a Patron Saint, Thomas would be a contender. If you explore the UCC website, you’ll read that the UCC is a denomination “where your mind is nourished as much as your soul.” Under the “What Do We Believe” section, one can discover these words: “We believe that each person is on a spiritual journey and that each of us is at a different stage of that journey. . . We believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God, engendering love, strengthening faith, dissolving guilt, and giving life purpose and direction.”[1] The UCC affirms that we’re all on different stages of our spiritual journeys, and that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God. Yes, Thomas would certainly be a contender for our denomination’s Patron Saint.

Let’s be honest, we love Thomas in Western Christianity in general. What’s not to love? Thomas voices his doubts, he owns them. He doesn’t take the word of others at face value without embarking on his own quest for truth. According to Serene Jones, President of Union Theological Seminary, Thomas “is the incredulous nonbeliever who hides inside every believing Christian—the questioner in us that resists easy answers to hard questions of faith, who always wants a little more proof.”[2] Thomas persistently searches for God by resisting easy answers to the hard questions of faith. And we get to see some of his process in the final chapter of John’s Gospel.

What Thomas ends up needing the most to affirm his faith is an experience of the Risen Christ. This is exactly what he gets. Jesus says to him in our sacred story, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”[3] What’s notable is that Jesus doesn’t express impatience with Thomas. He doesn’t tell Thomas that he shouldn’t be having to prove his Resurrection because Thomas should have believed the words of his fellow Disciples or Jesus’ own teachings. Jesus says that if you want more than a second-hand encounter with me—touch me, see me, believe in me, I’m here for you.

We don’t know if Thomas did touch Jesus—the text actually never says. Jesus meeting Thomas where he was with a compassionate verbal response might have been more than enough to overcome those doubts in our story. We see that Jesus offers this personal religious experience of the Resurrection and love winning. This is a story about God coming to us, no matter where we are. This has major implications for all of us sitting here this morning. As Serene Jones says, “When doubt crowds out hope, we can be confident that Jesus will come to meet us where we are, even if it is out on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe.”[4] We’re not left alone to fend for ourselves, though it certainly doesn’t always feel like Jesus is right there when we need him.

A story like today’s can give us hope when times are particularly hard or we find ourselves in a spiritual drought. Who’s to say that Jesus won’t come to meet us where we are too? If it happened to Thomas, who’s to say that it can’t happen to us?

I’ve always loved the story Lauren Winner, a Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke, tells about her personal spiritual drought in *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*. Winner was particularly lost and adrift right around Holy Week. During the Easter Vigil at her church, she

became so restless that she left in the middle of the service to go help in the kitchen for their church's Champagne Easter Vigil Feast. You've gotta love those Episcopalians. After returning to the sanctuary and taking Communion, she wondered if she should at least try to look like she was praying. As she faced her spiritual restlessness in the pew, she heard: "You can stay here now." Winner writes, "Just five words, and I know that this voice is God and what God means is that there is ground beneath my feet again, that this is the beginning of sanity and steadiness, this is the beginning of a reshaped life." [5] God broke through to her and met her right where she was. Lauren Winner heard in her heart "you can stay here now."

What's amazing about Thomas' religious experience is that Thomas responds to Jesus' compassionate movement toward him with an affirmation of faith unlike anything else we hear in the Gospels. Thomas calls Jesus God, one of the strongest declarations of faith in the entire New Testament. This story ends the Gospel of John on such a hopeful note for the rest of us. If Doubting Thomas can get to profound belief that God's presence is abiding and that love is victorious over the grave itself, we can too. If Jesus comes to find Thomas in the midst of his doubt-filled crisis of faith, maybe Jesus can come find us too. That's certainly what Lauren Winner describes in the midst of her personal crisis of faith. Sometimes the hardest thing we face on our spiritual journeys is holding out hope that God can reach us when we've reached that place of spiritual drought or just debilitating doubt. God seeks us out. And stories like today's help us to truly believe that when we fear that it's just not true.

Most of us face moments on our faith journeys when we live in those valleys of shadows and doubts. It can be painful and feel like the dark night of your soul. It's also perfectly normal that our faith journeys are not always smooth sailing. In fact, Thomas holds a special place in the heart of many future ministers as we embark upon the Ordination Process. After all, Seminary has sometimes mockingly been called Cemetery—because it's where your faith goes to die! That's not true for most people, but when you learn the historical-critical methods of Biblical Studies and the nuances of Christian Theology and Church History, it can certainly shake your faith. When your personal beliefs are constantly challenged, doubts can sometimes wear on you after a while. People do leave Seminary realizing that ministry is just not for them.

When I was a Student Minister, some of the Ordained Ministers with whom I worked always took the Sunday after Easter off. The Sunday after Easter is one of the lowest attended Sundays in the entire church year (historically speaking) and clergy are exhausted after Holy Week. It's sometimes called a Seminary Sunday because Seminarians get tasked with preaching on that Sunday all over the place. If you have a Student Minister, chances are you'll hear them preach on Thomas if the church follows the Revised Common Lectionary. At the time, not many of us appreciated being the low people on the Totem Pole and getting handed Doubting Thomas the Sunday after Easter to preach. But it's fitting that as you're with friends in the midst of Seminary who are beside you on this spiritual journey, that this is one of the Bible stories you struggle through together.

So maybe Thomas isn't just the potential Patron Saint of the United Church of Christ or Western Christians, maybe he's the Patron Saint of Seminarians who are seeking God so earnestly while struggling with difficult doubts. And here's what's so cool about Thomas—he matters deeply to people halfway across the world from us too. Legend has it that after this episode in the Gospel of John, after Thomas admits his doubts and comes to make a profound declaration of faith, Thomas arrived in India around 52 CE. Once there, he founded a Christian community who in time would call themselves St. Thomas Christians. Supposedly, Thomas helped establish churches and built a palace for an Indian King while he was living and working among the people. Thomas is thus the Patron Saint for architects. And that's not just me imagining that—St. Thomas really is the Patron Saint for architects, carpenters, construction workers, and surveyors. [6]

If you make your way to Mylapore, India you will find San Thome Church. It's the summit of Indian Christianity and a structure that would certainly make the Patron Saint of architects proud. This Roman Catholic Basilica was built over the tomb of Thomas who was martyred in 72 CE. Of course there's debate about Thomas' remains—some claim that his remains were transferred to Syria and then to Italy. But Indian Christians insist that he is and always has been buried in Mylapore. The Indian Government is satisfied with this belief so much so that they issued a postage stamp in Thomas' honor twice! Thomas is the Father of Indian Christianity and the Patron Saint of India.[7]

So let's recap—Thomas could be the Patron Saint for the UCC, Western Christians in general, and Seminarians specifically (at least in my book.) And he's the real, official Patron Saint for architects, carpenters, construction workers, surveyors, and for India, and the East Indies, and Pakistan actually. What a guy and what a broad appeal! Maybe it's because there's a little bit of Thomas in all of us. Maybe it's just really easy to identify with his yearning for faith, his doubts, his persistent search for God, his wanting a personal religious experience with the Risen Christ. Thomas is so relatable, especially today.

Thomas' story can give us strength in our moments of spiritual droughts. God can come to us, wherever we are in our lives. God can meet us where we are—whether we are full of faith or our faith is almost hanging by a thread. When we face those profound and desperate questions in our lives, we can rest assured that God is there in the midst of our hardest moments. We won't always have our eyes opened right then. We won't always hear the still small voice of God in our hearts. We won't always be able to reach out and touch Jesus even though that's what we may long for. Yet God does seek us out. God is seeking us out. We need only look to this profound story of Jesus meeting Thomas right where he was to help us believe again. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] "What we Believe," United Church of Christ website, http://www.ucc.org/about-us_what-we-believe

[2] Serene Jones, Theological Perspective of John 20:19-31 in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 2*, 400.

[3] John 20:27, NRSV.

[4] Serene Jones, Theological Perspective of John 20:19-31 in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*, 402.

[5] Lauren Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, 149.

[6] Richard P. McBrien, "Thomas, apostle" in *Lives of the Saints*, 269.

[7] San Thome Church website, <http://www.santhomechurch.com/>