

John 20: 24 -29

First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Lynn Vahle

April 29, 2007

Nicknames can be a problem. The pastor of my childhood refused to use anyone's nickname. He always called you by your given name. But there was a reason for that. About five years before I reached the age of confirmation there was a girl in the confirmation class by the name of Carolyn. But on the day of confirmation as she knelt in her white robe and Pastor Hoffman put his hand on her head and was about to call out her name to the chiming of the tower bell his mind went blank. He could not think of her given name. The only name that came to him was the nickname that had been given to her as an infant and was indeed the only name by which anyone knew her. There was a awkward silence as he searched his mind frantically trying to recall the name given to her at baptism. (Why he didn't have it written down in front of him I don't know, but he didn't.) Finally he did the only thing he could do, he preceded with her nickname - PeeWee Somers. Being a formal Lutheran church the laughter was muted, but the solemnity of the occasion was lost.

Our text this morning is about a disciple who had at least two nicknames. Apparently his given name was Thomas but in the circle of the disciples he was called "the twin" or Didymus. I suspect that any of you who are twins know how easy it is to lose your name and be called 'twin' or worse yet 'twinnie'. But throughout history Thomas has acquired another nickname based on this morning's text - indeed, we know him best as "doubting Thomas". But is that a fair characterization of this man.

According to John when Jesus first appeared to the disciples on Easter

evening Thomas was not there. John told us that the disciples were together behind locked doors because they were afraid for their lives. So it tells us something about Thomas that he was not there. Apparently he did not share the same fear or level of fear that the rest of the disciples did. Or perhaps he simply chose to deal with his fear in another way. He was somewhere in the city of Jerusalem, the city the rest of the disciples were frightened to be seen in.

In the 11th chapter of John's Gospel Jesus suggests to the disciples that they go to Judea. The disciples reminded Jesus that the last time they were in Judea they were almost stoned. "Do you really want to go there again?" they ask. Jesus says they must go because Lazarus has died. And it is Thomas who says that they must go even if it means dying. Then in chapter 14 right after Jesus told the disciples about the many mansions in the Father's house it is Thomas who says, "Lord, we don't know where you're going so how can we know the way?" Thomas invites Jesus to teach them and help them understand his words.

Thomas appears to be a brave man, not afraid to die for his beliefs, and one who was completely devoted to the master. Someone who worked hard to understand the message of Jesus teaching and ministry and indeed of his life. Thomas was evidently one of the disciples who watched the crucifixion from a safe distance and who watched as the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb. And I have to think that the crucifixion became a crisis for Thomas. It caused him to question everything he had come to believe in the time he had spent as a disciple.

When he does return to the group of disciples in the locked room they tell him the joyful news that they have seen Jesus and he is alive. Who of us can blame Thomas for his response. He was trying to understand the death

of Jesus and he knew that no one returns from the dead. And so he says to them perhaps out of his depression “I’ll have to see him for myself before I can believe what you say”.

A week later they are all together again and once more Jesus is suddenly there in the midst of them. And Jesus goes directly to Thomas and invites him to feel the scar of the nails and the gash along his side. Thomas cannot deny that this is the one he has loved and followed from Galilee. And I would suggest that what Thomas believed in that moment was that Jesus was alive. He had been a believer before but his doubts were about the resurrection. Given the experience of the dead and now risen Christ Thomas had to rework his belief system.

We may be critical of Thomas and his doubts. Certainly there is in our time a form of religion which declares that to have faith is to be certain, to know for sure, to have no doubts, to be totally convinced. But that same form of religion tends to have pat answers for everything, speaks in cliches, and discounts much of human experience as being relevant to the life of faith. And yet it is the experiences of our life that open us to new understandings of who Christ is and the full impact of his message. It is the experiences of our life that cause us to reexamine, reconsider, refine and reinterpret the words of Scripture.

Resurrection takes on a whole new meaning when we have been parted from a loved one by death. God’s will has to be rethought in the face of senseless tragedies. Salvation takes on new meaning after a narrow escape or recovery from a serious illness. To be loved unconditionally when we least deserve it causes us to understand grace in new ways. The plight of children in Zimbabwe forces us to think of sin on a global scale. The science and technology of our world raises new questions about being

faithful stewards of creation. And what does reconciliation mean in a place torn apart by sectarian violence.

When Thomas looks at Jesus with tears and says, “My Lord and my God” I think we can assume that like the disciples around the table in Emmaus his eyes were opened and he saw for the first time new dimensions to the message, ministry, and life of Jesus. His experience of death and resurrection had caused him to grow.

In the end Jesus says to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”. This is one of John’s themes throughout his Gospel. He is writing about 110 A.D. and he wanted to assure those people who had not had first hand experiences of Jesus that their faith was valid. Indeed the words apply to all of us who have never seen anyone rise from the dead but who believe in the truth of the resurrection.

But we dare not jump to the conclusion that what Thomas saw gave him his faith. Faith is always a gift of God and it comes to us in varying ways. Ultimately none of us can explain why we believe, we can only confess that we do. But the experiences of our life can shape the beliefs that we hold. Thomas believed long before that evening a week after Easter. But his experience of the risen Christ opened him to new understandings, new insights, and a deeper reverence for Jesus. In a book entitled *Were You There?* the author includes this quote: “The person who views the world at fifty the same as at twenty has wasted thirty years of life”. The same can be said for our understanding of Scripture and the story of Jesus Christ.

In the end I doubt if any of us believes without seeing. Oh, we may not see the resurrected Christ as Thomas did but we can catch glimpses of the risen Christ. We can hear whispers of his presence in the words of a friend, we can see a shadow of his presence in the story of another, we can

taste his presence in our daily bread, we can smell the aroma of his presence after a spring rain, we can feel the warmth of his presence in the love that gives us security. Faith is a gift of God but our beliefs become stronger when we encounter the risen Christ. And the experiences of life set the stage for that encounter.

We probably do Thomas a disservice when we continue to call him “doubting Thomas”. He was a man whose faith expanded because he was willing to wrestle with a seeming incongruity.

Let us pray.