



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 8, 2019
Patronal Feast of Saint Thomas

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Dr. Patrick S. Cheng, *Theologian in Residence*
on
John 20:24-29
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Sacred Wounds

Poor St. Thomas. It's been said that – other than Judas Iscariot – Thomas is the only apostle whose legacy is founded primarily on a blemish. Brian Shelton, a theologian and the author of the *Quest for the Historical Apostles*, writes:

“[Judas] Iscariot is synonymous with betrayal in the same way that Thomas is synonymous with doubt. For that matter, Thomas is the one disciple [who is] ascribed [with] a negative descriptor: ‘doubting Thomas.’”

If fact, the Anglican tradition has played a central role in associating Thomas with doubt. The first Book of Common Prayer – the 1549 prayer book – actually introduced the concept of doubt into the collect for St. Thomas Day. That collect describes Thomas as being “doubtful” of the resurrection, and it asks us to believe in Jesus Christ “without a doubt.” (Interestingly, the collect in the medieval Sarum Missal actually focuses on Thomas’s faithfulness.)

Although Thomas appears four times in St. John’s gospel, he is best known for today’s gospel passage. We all know the story. Thomas is away when the other apostles see the risen Christ. When they tell Thomas that they have seen Jesus, he refuses to believe them. He says famously: “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, Jesus shows up again. But this time Thomas is there. Jesus says 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 utters “My Lord and my God!” in astonishment. (This, of course, is the central scene depicted at the foot of the cross in our Great Reredos.)

But then Jesus responds with what sounds like a mild rebuke: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And, so, the concept of “doubting Thomas” was born.

Now some of the early church fathers have tried to come to Thomas’ defense. Origen, the great third-century theologian, attributed Thomas’ behavior to his meticulous personality. Origen writes: “Thomas seems to have had some precision and carefulness about him.” Peter Chrysologus, the fifth-century Bishop

of Ravenna, thought that Thomas was simply being a “conscientious investigator.” The only problem according to Chrysostom, however, was that Thomas was “a little too clever . . . for [his] own good.”

But in the end, the Christian tradition hasn’t been particularly kind to Thomas or to doubters in general. The Church’s ambivalence about doubt is not surprising, given the Augustinian and Reformation doctrine of salvation by faith alone. If *sola fides* is at the heart of one’s theology, then doubt is an existential threat to that faith and thus one’s salvation.

But let’s face it – who among us has not experienced doubt at some point in our faith journeys? In fact, some of you might even be experiencing doubt right now. But that’s not something that’s easy to admit.

Take today, for example. It’s a glorious day for our parish. It’s our patronal feast day and our “homecoming” day. There’s excitement and joy in the air. The Boys of the Choir have returned for a new school year. Sunday evensong starts up again. New faces – like your new Theologian in Residence – are being introduced and welcomed.

But despite all of this external pomp and circumstance, I suspect that some of you might be having a hard time feeling God’s presence inside. In fact, some of you might even be doubting that God is really there for you right now. Perhaps you are grieving some loss in your life. Perhaps you are feeling incredibly lonely or isolated. Or perhaps you – or a loved one – are experiencing some kind of health or financial crisis.

In fact, you might be feeling a lot like Thomas in today’s gospel. That is, everyone around you has encountered the risen Christ, and they are rejoicing. But you’re still waiting. Somehow you missed the boat. Somehow you didn’t get the memo. And so you long for some kind of tangible proof that God is actually with us, or that the Lord is risen indeed.

And even if you aren’t feeling like that right now, chances are that you’ve felt this way in the past – or that you will once again feel this way in the future.

So what do we do with our doubt?

The answer lies in today’s gospel text – and in the task of theology. While doubt is an important theme in today’s gospel, the text invites us to focus on something even more important: Jesus and his Sacred Wounds.

By calling our attention to the marks of the nails on Jesus’ hands and the wound in his side, the gospel reminds us of the scandal of the cross. The gospel reminds us that the risen Christ knows first-hand about suffering through his passion and his crucifixion. Jesus’ Sacred Wounds are neither erased nor forgotten in the resurrection. We are not alone in our suffering.

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has written that theology arises not from our strength or power, but from our woundedness and vulnerability. According to Moltmann, theology springs from the “open wound of God in one’s own life.” (The word for wound in Latin is *vulnus*, which is where the word vulnerability comes from.)

Moltmann writes that “[w]e are not theologians because we are particularly religious.” Rather, “we are theologians because in the face of this world we miss God.” In other words, theology arises when we acutely feel the *absence* of God. It is when we miss God that we recognize the need for God’s gift of grace – which is the only thing that can save us.

This, my sisters and brothers, is the task of theology. Theology is not an intellectual game or a pious exercise to make us feel good about ourselves. Rather, theology is about harnessing our God-given gifts of reason and intellect, and reflecting more deeply upon the Sacred Wounds of the Body of Christ. Good theology

always brings us back to one thing: the gift of salvation that God has given to us through the cross, which is, of course, found in the mark of the nails and in the side wound of Christ.

There is an ancient tradition about St. Thomas that you might not know about. According to this tradition – which is found in the *Acts of Thomas*, an apocryphal text written in the third century – Thomas traveled to South Asia during the last years of his life. He spread the gospel there until he was martyred around the year 72 in what is now modern-day Chennai, India. This tradition is attested to by a number of the early church fathers, including Gregory Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Jerome.

The point of Thomas' missionary journey to Asia is this. Yes, Thomas may have doubted. But this doubt ultimately led him to encounter Christ's Sacred Wounds. And that encounter led to a life of incredible faith – which included going to the ends of the earth and spreading the gospel until his dying breath.

I'd like to close with an excerpt from a beautiful hymn from the early 19th century that captures the saving grace of Christ's Sacred Wounds. The hymn goes like this:

“Jesus, our glorious Head and Chief,
Dear Object of our hearts' belief
O let us in thy Nail-prints see
Our Pardon and Election free;
And while we view by faith thy pierced side,
Call thee our Lord and God, who for us died.”

As your new Theologian in Residence, I look forward to journeying with you – both in times of faith *and* in times of doubt. I pray that, through the grace of God and through our gifts of reason and intellect, we will encounter together the “Nail-prints” and the “pierced side” of the Body of Christ.

May our theological journey together help us to embrace our doubt and to deepen our collective faith in the Sacred Wounds of Jesus. May these encounters help us, like St. Thomas, to exclaim “My Lord and my God!” And may we proclaim the risen Christ not only with these words, but also with our lives.

Happy St. Thomas Day!