

**April 11, 2021**  
**Second Sunday of Easter**  
**John 20:19-31**  
**Rev. Chip Whitacre**

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Sometimes this Sunday, this second Sunday of Easter, is referred to as Low Sunday. Whether a reference to the liturgical low after the high mass of Easter or to the usual drop in attendance is not clear. It is also known as Quasi Modo Sunday and White Sunday. It is a little surprising to learn that there is a Sunday in the church year that shares a name with the Hunchback of Notre Dame. But both of those last two names are references to new creation. Not only in the resurrection, but in baptism as well. Particularly of those newly baptized at the Easter Vigil. No matter what we call it we always read this story from John's Gospel on the Second Sunday of Easter. So, it is sometimes called Thomas Sunday as well. Now there's a lot going on in this story to be sure. But I am always drawn to the part of the story about Thomas. I suspect that is because John has made him such a focal point in the story. And probably because the church and its theologians have made such an issue of his supposed doubt.

The truth is Thomas is one of my favorite characters in all the Bible. I confess that I am naturally attracted to the flawed characters. So, people like Jonah and Nicodemus are on my list too. I think that is because I have had some personal experience resisting God's attempts to send me to places I didn't want to go. Or times when I have showed up under cover of darkness to avoid detection. I like these characters for their human imperfections that look so much like my own. That God chooses to work through them anyway gives me comfort. That they are all transformed for the better by their interaction with God gives me hope. But Thomas is a little bit different. I have stopped thinking about him as flawed. But I have to admit that he captures perfectly the inner rationalist who haunts the edges of my faith.

In the end Jonah goes to Nineveh and Nineveh repents. Nicodemus is there when the disciples had all abandoned Jesus; helping to get his broken body down from the cross and into the tomb. Thomas is heroic by comparison. At least courageous. He makes no attempt to evade the issue or to avoid being caught out. He is bold enough to make an open, honest statement of skepticism that sets him apart from the other disciples. "*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and hand in his side, I will not believe*". He is not prepared to accept an apparition. He needs to touch Jesus not just see him. For his honesty he has been made the subject of many theological tomes about doubt over the centuries. Yet the truly remarkable element of this story is not Thomas' skepticism.

Consider for a minute what has transpired before Thomas' encounter with Jesus. The disciples who have hidden themselves behind locked doors out of fear are visited by Jesus. This is the same group who has already been told by Mary Magdalene that Jesus is risen. Now Jesus enters the room without apparent use of the door. And they don't recognize. He has to show them his wounds too before they see that it's actually him. When they do understand it is him they are overjoyed. He sends his peace upon them. And sends them out into the world just as the Father has sent him. Breathes on them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Another reference to new creation. And finally, he gives them complete authority regarding forgiveness. What is truly remarkable here is not Thomas' doubt. It is that eight days later – yet another reference to new creation - when Jesus comes again, the disciples are still cowering behind locked doors.

They are surely not living as Easter people. So, we might wonder why the church has been so focused on Thomas and his doubt alone.

The truth is we don't know much about Thomas. In the synoptic Gospels his name is only included in the list of disciples. And he gets a few mentions in the Acts of the Apostles. He is a prominent character only in the Gospel of John where he appears four times. And those appearances tell us something about him. In Chapter 11 he decides that the disciples should accompany Jesus on his return to Judea in order to raise Lazarus from the dead. *"Let us also go, that we may die with him"*. The other disciples are concerned about returning to a place where a crowd recently tried to stone Jesus. But Jesus has made up his mind to go and Thomas, for one, is ready to go with him. We encounter him a second time in Chapter 14 when he questions Jesus himself about knowing the way to where he is going. *"Lord we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* We see that he is not afraid to admit that he doesn't understand Jesus. And he is prepared to ask for that understanding. We meet up with him for the third time in today's lesson. And for a fourth at the end of John's Gospel when a group of disciples go fishing with Peter.

Beyond that we are left with a couple interesting facts and what tradition tells us. The fact is his name, Thomas, is actually not a name. It is the English rendering of the Aramaic word for twin. In the Syrian tradition he is known as Judas Thomas or Judas the Twin, which is sort of inconvenient. There are too many Judases in the scriptures and one in particular is troublesome. Thomas is claimed as the founder of several churches in southern India where he was martyred in the year 72. Even today there are Christian Churches whose members claim to be Thomas Christians. Hardly the record of an unfaithful disciple. We are actually not told if Thomas touches Jesus in the story. We are left to assume so. But there are a number of reliquaries claiming to contain the famous finger of Thomas. Judging from the number of them he must have been uniquely endowed with digits. But I think the touch is only an element in this story that allows for a larger purpose.

A week after his first appearance, when Jesus appears to the disciples again, he knows of Thomas' need to experience him in the flesh already. And what does he do. He does not scold Thomas for his lack of faith. Now, let's face it, Jesus is no shrinking violet. He has been known to upbraid sharply those gathered around him from time to time. Particularly, those who are of "little" faith or seeking a "sign". But in this instance, he is gentler. More generous. Instead, he meets Thomas where he is. *"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe"*. And in that instant Thomas recognizes Jesus for who he truly is, "My Lord and my God", which makes him the first person to recognize Jesus' divinity. Whether or not Thomas actually touches Jesus wounds he is touched by Jesus in a way that opens his eyes to the new creation before him.

Considering the last year of our life, we are well aware of the power of touch. Remember when we used to touch each other in greeting, affection, encouragement and healing? Suddenly we were no longer shaking hands. Giving each other pats on the back for a job well done. Or hugs of affection and comfort. In an instant all our interactions were at a safe distance. Even with adult children and grandchildren. All that tactile contact and the emotional comfort that came with it was gone just like that. Perhaps worse still we lost the opportunity to hold up our hands just so to receive the body of Christ. To touch and be touched by Jesus, if you will. As a community we became disembodied heads on a computer screen. A cacophony of voices out of synch in Zoom on Sunday mornings. Yes, we know a little something about

the power of touch and our need for it. That alone should help us be a little more sympathetic to Thomas. Jesus was.

In the end we see that Thomas is not alone in his disbelief. That is not why he stands alone in the story. What makes him unique is his willingness to say what is on his mind. He serves us as an example of someone who has the courage to bring his whole self to his faith. His loyalty to Jesus, his willingness to question and his trust in God. We learn from his example that God will not hesitate to meet us exactly where we are on our journey. He shows us that struggling with our doubts is a natural part of the faith journey. That honest engagement with them can renew our vision of the new creation in the resurrected Jesus. Thomas reminds us that we too are called to live as Easter people. Amen.