

Second Sunday of Easter, Gospel, Year B

PROFILE OF A BELIEVER

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

19When 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." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Author's Note: This is a departure from the usual textual analysis. I have taken a text that comes up every year on the Second Sunday of Easter and creatively recast it as monologue/sermon that reflects the six steps of the Crossings matrix.

DIAGNOSIS: Doubting Thomas

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): My Disillusionment
My name is . . . Thomas. My friends call me Didymus, "The Twin." But as you know, it is not by this name that I have been most remembered over the years. Mention Thomas to anyone and immediately they will call me "Doubting Thomas." It's not fair that I am remembered for my weakness when it was my confession of faith that brings the Gospel of John to its dramatic climax.

Few remember that I was the daring believer who took the gospel all the way to the shores of India. It seems that I shall be forever cursed with the name "Doubting Thomas."

Yes, I doubted, but I also believed! As I tell you my story, listen to it not just as the anatomy of a doubter, but as the anatomy of a believer. Even more, you will hear your story as well. After all, it is no accident that I am called "The Twin." For when you look at me, you will see your "twin."

It all started on the first day of the week, three days after Jesus had been crucified. The events of Friday had been disillusioning. Any hopes that Jesus had kindled within us were put to death on that cross.

For a while it seemed as if we were living a dream. Jesus had captured our hearts and imaginations. He lived fearlessly in defiance of death itself. We began to believe that the same kind of life was possible for us. We dreamed of the day when we would be able to get the Romans off our backs, Jesus would be our Messiah and our nation would once again stand tall with dignity. Jesus would bring peace to the hearts of others as he had done to us.

We never thought that death would be a problem for him. I guess we thought, when the time was right, that he would just whisk it away. After all, he had resuscitated dead children with a simple word. He had raised Lazarus' stinking body after the man had been lifeless for days. We just figured that somehow it would be no problem for him.

His death ended our dreams. Perhaps that is all they ever were . . . dreams. In the real world death has the last word. In the real world, those with the guns and bucks run the show. In the real world justice is a fleeting dream. In the real word love does not go very far. In the real world this life is all you

have got. You had better make the most of it.

That is why I was not with my friends that Sunday, hiding behind locked doors, afraid of the Jews, still somehow clinging to their shattered dreams. I was enough of a realist to recognize that the dream was over. The nails, wounds, blood, and death of crucifixion were the ultimate doses of reality. There was no use dreaming that it could be any other way. Jesus had been wrong, . . . dead wrong. Therefore, I was gone that Sunday. I was back out there in the real world getting a firm grip on what was left of my life. I'd had enough dreaming for a lifetime.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): My Disbelief

So, when my friends told me that they had seen the Lord . . . alive, . . . I just could not believe it. It must have been some figment of their imaginations. The foolish rumor started by Mary Magdalene must have started them dreaming all over again.

Now, don't get me wrong. It is not that I didn't believe that such miracles were possible. Anything is possible! Jesus' death on Friday was much more disturbing and personal than that.

You know what it's like when you lose a loved one, when someone close to you dies. You are not only sad, . . . you are scared! When you look at the cold, dead flesh of your loved one, you know that someday that is going to be you! You know that you are one step closer to the grave.

But that fear also prods you into getting out there into the world ready to do battle with reality. When I decided to leave my frightened brothers behind in that locked room, I was on a crusade. Okay, I concluded, . . . if this is really what life is all about, if the swords of the rich and powerful are what really run this world, if death really is the last word and God is going to measure you by what you accomplish, . . . then I'm not going to sit around and waste time. I was going to show them

all a thing or two.

To believe that Jesus was alive would have meant ignoring everything I knew to be true about the world. So I said to them, "Show me! Prove to me that Jesus has risen and then I will believe that the One calling the shots in this world is not whoever has got the strongest army or the biggest bank account . . . but is God."

I'm sure that you know all about laying down such conditions for believing. "God, if you make me well, then I will do what ever you ask. God, if you help me with this or give me that, then I will go to church every Sunday. God, if you give me prosperity, a winning team, good grades in school, then I will believe."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): My Death

We think we can bargain with God. We think we can play "Let's Make a Deal!" But what we are really saying is that we don't trust God any more. For God to truly be our god, we have to be able to count on God when the chips are down. We must be able to count on God when faced with the biggest threat of all: our death! If God can't deliver us from that, is God really worth our trust? I don't think so. When I asked my friends to "Show me!" it's not just that I didn't believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. I didn't believe that God would ever care enough to save ME from MY death.

PROGNOSIS: Believing Thomas

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Peace Be with You Well, you know what happened. Eight days later I was with my friends in that same room in Jerusalem. Jesus appeared again. However, this time I saw him with my very own eyes. He was alive and breathing. I actually saw the marks of death in his hands and his side. I saw not a dead corpse but the living flesh of Jesus! He invited me to touch the wounds in his hands and his

side.

You would think that actually seeing and touching the physical evidence of the risen Jesus was the most memorable thing to take place in that room. It wasn't. What I found to be even more incredible was the way Jesus treated me. He knew what a doubter and skeptic I had been. He would have had every right to criticize me. But he didn't! There was no malice or anger in his voice. There was only mercy and forgiveness as he said to me, "Peace be with you."

Suddenly it became clear to me: This was not just the case of a dead man coming back to life. The resurrection of Jesus was not just the resuscitation of a dead corpse. It meant that all he had promised me during his life was true. It meant that God loved even me, even the doubting, skeptical, cynical realist called Thomas!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): My Lord and My God

How else could I respond? Yes, Jesus truly is . . . "My Lord and my God!" Because of him, . . . I no longer live my life afraid, looking always to protect myself and my interests, afraid that those with the guns and the bucks can take my life, afraid that God himself has handed me over to death and oblivion. God has the last word and that word is "I love you, doubting, insecure, skeptical Thomas!"

You may think that it is easy for me to stand before you this morning and talk so fervently about believing because I actually got to see and touch the risen Jesus. You may think that there is no way that your faith could ever be as strong as the faith of an actual eyewitness of the risen Jesus . . . like me.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

However, I remember Jesus' parting words: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." He was talking about people like you. There may be times when you feel just like I did, all alone, abandoned, afraid that if I don't do something, my life won't matter. It is then you need to remember my story, the story of old doubting Thomas. If the risen Lord could rescue me from my faithless doubt, then he can surely do the same for you.

You are with me behind locked doors in Jerusalem. You get to touch his body. You get to hear him speak. As bread is placed in your hands, as wine wets your lips, as you hear that glorious good news that God no longer holds your sins against you, something amazing happens. You believe that Jesus is risen from the dead. You have a future. You have hope for tomorrow. You have a God you can count on.

Yes, I am Thomas, called "The Twin," . . . your twin . . . the twin not only of your doubt but also the twin of your own frail faith. Jesus changed old "doubting Thomas" into "believing Thomas." He promises to do the same for you, even here, now. Come to the table. Place your hands into his wounds, feel the bread, taste the wine, receive Christ's living body and blood . . . and believe!