

**SERMON: “Thomas in context”**

Preaching, from this pulpit, that week-after-week asks of given scripture passages, “What is it saying?”, [this preaching] is preceded (in all our preachers’ preparations) by a list of questions that goes like this:

1. Who is the writer?
2. Who is the audience?, and what is their situation / reality?
3. What is the writer saying to them? – or, *reframed* – What do the first readers ‘get’ from hearing this?

and, only then,

4. What might all this mean for me, in my situation / reality?

Today—the second Sunday of Easter— “Doubting Thomas” is (as always) our primary focus, this story only found in our canon’s fourth Gospel.

So then, number one: Who wrote it?

In that place and era, there are two layers to having an answer. Scholarly argument from ancient to modern points to Jesus’ disciple John, son of Zebedee, brother of James, as the work’s authority. Either the diaspora following Rome’s overthrow of Israel or—on John’s part—an earlier personal decision to ‘go out to spread the Gospel’ took him to Ephesus. His evangelism there generated a church, known to history as the Johannine community. As to the actual writing down of the Gospel text, sometime between 80 and 120 CE, it is not John himself (most likely dead) but a leading disciple / learner / preacher / teacher under John’s ministry who collected, wrote and edited the Gospel account in his name (which is to say, inside his “author”-ity).

Number two: The audience? It is, quite straightforwardly, the existing and evolving Johannine community. We know the focused purpose of the work because it is stated plainly in today’s reading: “these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” You may furthermore recall (*within our recent memory*, from Bert’s

sermon four weeks ago) that this community *has* experienced, and *lives with the threat of*, persecution. On top of which, as I've already noted, their direct link to Jesus himself, the disciple John, is no longer there at the center of their communal life. It is this written record that stands up *to lead the community on*, in John's stead, in the hands of the next generation of leadership.

Number three (... and, here, we are going to focus in on today's 'Thomas story'): What is the message to this audience?

To 'get inside' where we need to be, here is the reorientation (or reframe) that makes all the difference: Thomas does not loom large **to them** for his doubting (as has so often been emphasized by western Christianity), but rather for his direct place-holding *for each and every person in that community*. I shall explain.

Remember what we've explored before concerning the Johannine Community, this anti-society with

- its internal anti-language, and
- its emphasis on altered state of consciousness experiences of Jesus (visitations by Jesus), who is said—in these experiences—to come down from the heavenly sky-realm to be seen and heard by, and to commune with, his disciples/followers.

Now, consider each and every individual as they start on the outside of this community (this church) and, from there, become attracted (i) to it, (ii) to its message, and most centrally (iii) to this man Jesus's embodiment and delivery of "the way, the truth and the life". Such an inquirer soon learns about the charged visionary experiences shared by these community members: life-changing and life-sustaining epiphanies, every one of them! Furthermore, that in-group phenomenon profoundly ties the entire community together in faith and love. The inquirer is, at once, in awe of it all, yet skeptical ... *and* keenly aware of feeling themselves an outsider because they haven't seen-and-heard this "lifted up" Jesus for themselves. Can you see how profoundly they are

identified, in the story, with Thomas during that sabbatical stretch-of-days, longing to experience the risen, ascended and descending Christ (as have all those others!), *for lack of it* feeling apart / “not yet ‘truly in’.” The Lord Jesus’s eighth-day appearance to Thomas *is directed right at this inquirer*: (1) As to their status, with no visionary encounter of their own: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (2) As to what they must do next: Thomas models that they must simply wait!

*Equally addressed* is a second quandary. For this, we need to delve a little deeper into modern research concerning altered level of consciousness experiences across those 80% of human societies that regularly undergo them. What is found makes good intuitive sense, and applying it here to the early Christianity: People who repeatedly got to experience the risen Jesus in an altered state of consciousness did so *because they were culturally and spiritually set up / buoyed up to do so*. Think about it!: The people of the New Testament era had, in their faith background—from Ezekiel, Zechariah, Daniel and the book of Enoch—event after event that took place in an alternate dimension of reality and that involved people or beings who straddled the conscious/unconscious divide. More immediately, these first century people had—in the Jesus’ material—records of many, in liminal space [in “in-between space”], seeing what was holy: the sleep-ridden disciples’ story of the Transfiguration, the story of Jesus not-at-first-recognizable to lost-in-her-grief Mary Magdalene outside the tomb, the story of Jesus not-at-first recognizable to two bereft disciples on the road to Emmaeus, the stories of Jesus twice suddenly appearing inside a locked Jerusalem room with his scared disciples, the story of Jesus not-at-first-recognizable to exhausted disciples back fishing in Galilee. First century listeners were socially, psychologically and spiritually primed, indeed conditioned, to dreaming their own such scenes and having their own such visions ... encounters where the one addressing them turns out to be Jesus ... *especially* as peer-after-peer not only reports but excitedly

pins their “saved existence” upon such experience! Nonetheless, having said this, there could be those in the community who *not-yet*—and conceivable some who *not-ever*—received such a visitation from Jesus. Any such person is, here again, found with Thomas during that stretch of days with no sign of his own, longing to see, at risk of feeling “not yet ‘fully in’,” and the Lord Jesus Christ says: “Blessed are [you] who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” “*Blessed are you!*” Here, Jesus’s penultimate earthly words of this Gospel are to *honour*, in truth to *elevate*, these followers’ faith. They are not to be excluded from the community for lack of an experiential credential; they are to be prized for believing without any of the evidence that others inwardly possess and cherish.

Now Number 4: “What might all this mean for you / for me, in our situation / our reality?” As I relayed some weeks ago, when reintroducing you (as a congregation) to the John’s Gospel and the Johannine Community, it is not about seeking-for-ourselves recurring visionary experiences of Jesus, descending from the sky-realm to us. You may remember that I referenced the research of Shawna Lucas, spiritual care manager and clinical educator at “CAMH” (the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health), who—for psychologists and psychiatrists, and for all of us—definitively differentiates religious experience from psychotic break. A necessary advance!, for there are modern westerners who have religious mountain-top experiences (visions or dreams); not because of ardently seeking to have them, and not that these experiences happen over and over again; but that they do take place and they have tremendous formative impact on that person’s living. They are life-changing! And then that person comes down from the mountain top to where life—in all its complexity—goes on.

The majority of westerners never have such an experience. Those who do. very rarely have a second one. Where someone is frequently seeing and/or hearing alternative level of consciousness input, likewise where

there is a person continually *seeking* such spiritual highs, *there* there is diagnosable spiritual and mental illness.

So, clearly, what John's account of the Gospel means for us is not-at-all that we should try inauthentically to push ourselves into a time before modernism, before the industrial and scientific revolutions, and into the Eastern world's social and psychological framework devoid of ego, in order somehow to recreate the Johannine community and its visionary experiencing of Jesus-come-down-from-the-sky-realm.

What we modern and post-modern Christians *can see* and *learn* and *cherish* here, today, from the story of Thomas, is how Jesus, on his part, leaves no one behind, no one on the outside, *not ever!* Thomas had need of *evidence* and he was given what he needed. The next generation of believers would have the testimonial *evidence* of those who walked alongside Jesus; the following generations would inherit the testimonial *evidence* of written Gospel accounts, “written so that they [that you] may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that, through believing, they [and you] may have life in his name”. True, many then-and-there had recurring visionary experiences; some in our time and place point to an episode that reframes our lives; but what matters is the awakening to this Christ of the Gospels and a turning to follow in his Way. Everyone so inclined—Jesus assures Thomas and, through him, all of us—[everyone so inclined] is forever blessed. Amen.