

I don't blame Thomas

John Bellaimey, St. John's Mpls, II Easter, April 16, 2023 9:00 service

You've probably heard of his nickname, *doubting Thomas*. It's not a compliment. The other eleven believed, so why didn't he?

Well, for one thing, they all got to freak out when Jesus somehow got past a locked door. For another, they all got to examine his wounds, left by the nails and spearhead on Good Friday. Even if there was now something different about his body, it wasn't that. And for a third thing, they all received his blessing, in which Jesus breathed his divine essence, the holy spirit, reminding everyone of God breathing life into Eve and Adam.

Jesus could tell that Thomas wanted the same experience he'd missed, and Jesus chided him: OK, now you're caught up with the others. But in the future, people are going to have to take somebody else's word for it. And blessed be they.

Thomas' rival, John, then writes, I'm putting all these details in so you will believe me, even if Tom didn't. You'll have the kind of life Jesus taught, in this life and in the next world. And even as I come to the end of my book, John went on to apologize; even this book doesn't do it justice. All the books in the world couldn't describe what it was like in our bodies to really be there. So don't blame Thomas. You had to be there.

When Lisa told the story of her whale dream last week, she also did the best she could to describe it. A whale delivered her to meet Jesus. He reassured her he'd be there with his chalice of living water. That the spring the water came from is older and deeper than Christianity or any religion. Dreams are mysterious, and a dream like that might come once in a life. Perhaps instead, you've had a moment like I had in church, or in the woods, where some powerful intuition told you that God was there. A friend who is hardly a practicing Christian was utterly convinced that Jesus was helping her late father move on and that she and her mother were asked to please stop mourning and begin living again. My mother-in-law was visited by her dad in a dream when in reality he lay in a nursing home bed. In the dream, he was a young man, running through a field in his native Sweden, smiling. The nursing home called shortly after she fell back to sleep. Oscar had just died. A friend of Lynnell's and her twin sister had almost identical

messages in dreams from their late mother, urging them to stop looking because her killer would never be found. Or maybe you've been hiking or looking at a sunrise, and a whole landscape lit up with goodness and love and you just knew it wasn't just pretty scenery. God is our name for the Oneness, the Many, the More. The disciples of Jesus were so convinced that their dead teacher was alive and divine that they spent the rest of their lives radiating love. It wasn't their storytelling abilities that got Christianity started. It was the way they walked through the world. The way you felt when you were with them. And if you need a "logical" reason to believe in Jesus, that's the best one I know.

If you're lucky like I am, and were shown a life of faith by parents and teachers who really trusted in the invisible and eternal, you might be less skeptical of what others might call woo-woo or an overactive imagination. Or if you're kind of intuitive anyway, picking up vibes in "thin places" might already be your cup of tea. But a lot of us, if we are honest, trust more in science. If there's a controlled experiment or a randomized trial, and something seems true, we'll believe it's not just the product of someone's wishful thinking. Especially if that someone seems to be selling something. That's what so many distrust in some evangelical churches. *Join up so you don't go to hell. Follow us so the devil doesn't catch you.*

Some of us are more spiritual than religious, and find meaning without a church. Others are more religious than spiritual, and never expect to actually meet or hear God in a dream or on a mountaintop. Don't ask us what God is "doing" in our life. But we love church for the music and the friendships and the good works. The Episcopal Church welcomes both spiritual and religious, and whichever way you lean, we invite you to experience both.

I became an Episcopalian when I was young, finding a terrific community at Christ Church in downtown Detroit. I loved the classical music and the excellent preaching. I had a crush on the young priest, Nancy Sargent, and I played volleyball in the parish hall every Wednesday followed by a couple of fun hours of conversation at the Woodbridge Tavern. Nancy preached a sermon series one year on the interpretations of dreams and the spiritual resource of our unconscious, influenced by the Jungian analyst Morton Kelsey. She told us about the plaque on Carl Jung's wall: *bidden or unbidden, God is here*. To me, that meant God is not just an Imaginary Sky Friend (pace Dan Savage).

I had a powerful emotional experience of God's presence right there. At the end of one of those sermons, Nancy said, "Jesus is waiting for you on the other side of silence." And while looking at a mosaic angel pointing to the empty tomb, I felt a rush of recognition, and knew immediately that I needed to keep traveling the way I was heading, through a dark and silent place. I burst into tears.

Thomas just wanted that, and I can't blame him. He was afraid he'd missed it. He wasn't at the roadside dinner in Emmaus when the mysterious companion turned out to be Jesus. He wasn't at the tomb like Mary Magdalene, who thought Jesus was the gardener or a grave-robber. Even Peter and John, who raced to the tomb, found nobody there.

[By the way, John won the footrace. He made sure to mention that. Not Peter.]

Thomas wanted to be able to tell people that resurrection wasn't just a metaphor about springtime being beautiful. The little we know of him reveals a practical, literal man. Jesus had once told the disciples he was going away, but would prepare a place for them. Thomas then piped up, Lord, we don't know where this Many Mansions place is. How will we find it? Jesus answered *I am the way, and the truth, and the life* OK, but not exactly google map directions.

Thomas is also famous for traveling far to the east, to India, and establishing the church there. He's the patron saint of Christians there, and Thomas is a common family name.

So call him doubting Thomas if you want, but how about also building Thomas and wayfinding Thomas. I'd put it this way: Thomas reminds us we don't just come here for interesting ideas, though I love those. We don't need God in our head or even in our hearts, though so many of you have so much God in your hearts that we could totally start an emotional support blood bank. Where we really need God is in our bodies. Our tear ducts, our shoulders, our posture, our feet. We should probably be doing yoga here, or Pilates, or swinging on swings, or dancing. Thomas didn't just want to see Jesus come through a locked door, which is good because nobody did see that. He wanted to touch the wounds of the wounded healer.

Maybe along with John the Baptist, we could do worse than adopt this practical fellow as the patron saint of our own spiritual and religious experience. Thomas didn't really trust the other eleven, and he should have. And so should we. But it's hard to blame him. Better instead to forgive him and get on with our work.

First Lesson sitting Sirach aka Ecclesiasticus 1:14-20

The beginning of wisdom is awe of the Holy One;

with the faithful in the womb she was created, together with them.

With humankind she built her roost, an eternal foundation,

and among their descendants, she will be trusted.

The fullness of wisdom is to reverence the Holy One;

she inebriates mortals with her fruits.

Every house of theirs she fills whole with desirable things,

and their storehouses with her produce.

A crown of wisdom is the awe of the Holy One,

sprouting peace and wholeness, healing.

Skill and knowledge, understanding she rained down,

and she exalted the reputation of those who hold her.

The root of wisdom is to reverence the Holy One,

and her branches are length of days.

Reader People The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Gospel John 20:19-31

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you." Then he took a deep breath and breathed

into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?" But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master." But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it." Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe." Thomas said, "My Master! My God!" Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.