

Sunday, April 24, 2022
Second Sunday of Easter

THE REPUTATION RESTORATION PROJECT OR SOMEBODY DONE SOMEBODY WRONG
John 20:19-31

There's a country song that insists "Somebody done somebody wrong." The church has done "somebodies" wrong over the centuries. I feel a desire to try to right some wrongs that are at least 2,000 years old.

Thomas is the major player in the gospel drama played out in the gospel. He was one of the 12 apostles. In the calendar of saints, December 21 is St. Thomas Day. Yet, when you hear the name Thomas, what is the first word that crosses your mind? What nickname does the church give? Doubting Thomas. He has been called Doubting Thomas for so many centuries, some people think that's his first name. I grew up in a church where every boy over the age of eight was called "Brother." I was called "Brother Rodney" so many times I thought it was my first name. Look, it's true some people get tagged with reputations that are not true.

We understand this because church people are no strangers to tagging people with judgmental, demeaning nicknames. "Doubting Thomas" indeed! Tacky! Well, the church has a history of this kind of mistreatment. In the south, if someone in your family tree was a known liar and thief, for generations they would say, "Well, he's a McKinstry and McKinstry's are liars and thieves." There's even evidence in the New Testament of this kind of mental hangover. I wonder if the people of Crete have ever overcome these words from Titus: "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons."

Even when there seems to be evidence for judgment, we still can get it wrong. You know about Project Innocence, right? This is a group of lawyers and volunteers who have used DNA evidence to prove that people convicted of murder didn't do the crime. There have been so many convictions overturned that there needs to be a new saying, "Whether you did the crime or not, you are doing the time." We can really mess up people's lives. And the church has often been a gang leader. The church has been known to make up demons and witches to have a bonfire. The church has seen witches on broomsticks and demons in the trees. The church has burned people at the stake for doing nothing more than opposing a ruthless king or believing in baptizing people by immersion. The church can be a monster.

Jesus doesn't call him "Doubting Thomas." Jesus calls people by their names and he gives people new names. Jesus gives us names to live up to. "Your name is Simon: You shall be called Rock." Jesus calls us by name to give us life. "Zacchaeus" come out of that tree and let's have lunch." Isn't that the meaning of grace? Jesus calls us by name and then gives us new names. Parents used to name their children "Truthful" in anticipation of how they would live: No duplicity! No lying! A simple meaning of what we say will be what we mean, so help us God! Do you think he's called "Doubting Thomas" in heaven?

Why are we so prone to believe the worst about people? There's a budding consensus that social media is poisoning our social community. Civility is dead. Outrage is in. The more outrageous the more it sells. Extremism is the fashion. Disinformation campaigns. Are people even aware they are making decisions based on "bots?" As human beings evolved to gossip, preen, manipulate, and ostracize, social media has multiplied all of this. If you constantly express anger, spite, outrage at others, your friends will find you tiresome, but on social media that are few restraints. You can raise hell till the cows come home or pigs fly. Each emotional word used in Twitter increases its virality by 20%. Posts that exhibit indignant disagreement receive twice as much engagement as good and nice posts on Facebook.

What if this is just moral grandstanding? Grandstanders pile on moral charges, public shaming, insist that everyone else is wrong or a moron. They scrutinize every word spoken by their opponents and pounce on them to create public outrage. We are becoming a cruel and shallow people through anti-social media. We would all have the good sense not to join a lynch mob forming in our city, but how many of us are members of online lynching mobs? We have to rebuild a public middle square. We don't have to agree with one another, but we don't have to be so disagreeable.

When Twitter introduced the "retweet" button, people were able to send out all kinds of crazy stuff and then say, "I only retweeted it. I didn't say it." One of the developers of Retweet on Twitter says he now regrets it. "We might have just handed a four-year-old a loaded gun."

We are quick now to think the worst of everyone. Right off the bat. The worst. Doubting Thomas. And it sticks. "Stickiness" by Sara Ahmed. "Needless to say, the sticky and the disgusting have been reduced to each other. "Horrible things stick, like glue, like slime." What sticks and what doesn't stick is no easy equation. The church has a certain "stickiness" in our historical DNA – judgment, condemnation, rebuke, shame, guilt.

THOMAS

Now, for Thomas. On the one hand, this was not unbelieving doubt. It was honest, emotional, anguished, "I want to believe" doubt. This was "I believe, help my unbelief" doubt. Don't we know that honest doubt is always mixed with faith? There's no reason to condemn Thomas for being like all of us. We have all been through dark patches of doubt. "How long will I cry violence and you will not hear?" "I, I, alone have left as your faithful prophet." "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" Why are Christians so afraid of their own darkness? We blame a man whose doubt, like ours, was as natural as the sun coming up every morning. More people show up on Sunday with the attitude of Thomas than perhaps any biblical character.

Well Thomas was more than a doubter. After Jesus learned of the death of Lazarus, he determined to go back to Bethany. The disciples tried to dissuade him because his enemies there were seeking to kill him, but Thomas says, "Let us go also, that we may die with him." Why didn't we name him "Faithful Thomas" or "Loyal Thomas"?

When Jesus said, "You know the way to the place where I am going," it was Thomas who said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the

way?" Why haven't we called him "Seeking Thomas" or "Philosopher Thomas" or "Questioning Thomas"? There's so much more to Thomas than doubt.

"How can we know the way?" What a great question. This is the Thomas, I want you to know. He wants to know the way. I'm not sure the story of Thomas makes sense in a post-truth age like ours. Thomas asks for proof. He wants evidence. We no longer honor proof or evidence. We honor alternative truth, and we honor the "other side." I don't see a big market for people who want to see the marks in the hands and feet of Jesus. I don't see people lining up to see if they can have proof of anything. We don't want proof and that should open the door to trust and faith. But in our culture, it aids and abets suspicion, mistrust, and cynicism.

Cut THOMAS SOME SLACK! His lack of belief is aimed at his fellow disciples more than anyone else. He's not sure they are telling him the truth. Look, most of you have been Christian long enough to know that you can't believe everything a Christian tells you.

Jesus comes back for Thomas. This is really good news. He doesn't leave Thomas out there in the dark to struggle alone. He comes for him to offer him a new kind of future. **"Do not doubt but believe."** When the new creation, the new previously thought impossible appears before him and brings history and faith together in a rush, Thomas cries, "My Lord and my God." Give me a thousand men and women like Thomas: MY LORD AND MY GOD! I think the time has come to call him Honest Thomas.

The good news is that Jesus not only shows up, but he has something to say that can deliver Thomas and some of us from doubt and fear. Jesus comes for his holdouts, the stubborn, resistant, independent rascals. And what he teaches is just as important as his resurrection. Jesus gives Easter to Thomas. Jesus never calls him Doubting Thomas. Jesus says, "Blessed Thomas."

It is time to allow the Reputation Restoration Project to do its work. We can let go of Doubting Thomas, Sinning Mary, and Suicide Judas. We can give them the Easter gifts that Jesus gave to Thomas: Peace be with you. I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. Forgive one another. Amen