

Thomas.

Thomas was committed and courageous.

Jesus had left Judea when he was about to be stoned to death for blasphemy.

Yet when his friend Lazarus died

and he decided to go back to that dangerous place, —

it was Thomas who said to his fellow disciples, —

*“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*ⁱⁱ

Thomas was committed — and courageous.

Thomas was also one who wanted to know.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled,”

Jesus had said to his disciples the night of his arrest.

“I go to prepare a place for you

so that where I am, there you may be also.

And you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Hearing this, it was Thomas who said, —

“Lord, we do not know where you are going.

How can we know the way?”

Thomas wanted to know.

Thomas. He is called “the Twin.”

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I have been learning a lot about twins.

I now have two sets of them as grandchildren. It is wild!

The second set, born just a month ago,—

are still figuring out how to focus their eyes.

They don’t yet know their arms and legs actually belong to them.

But the first set, Eliza and Tyler, they are now two and a half years old.

Their personalities are emerging.

They are walking, — I should say running.

They are talking — all the time.

I have noticed, even though they talk to others around them, —

they have a special language they use between themselves.

A sibling rivalry is developing.

But they are very close. They delight in one another.

Eliza is the loud one, the assertive one.

Tyler is, for the most part, more reserved and quiet.

They still share the same bedroom.

When they awake in the morning, —

you can hear them chattering in that special language.

They do the same when they supposedly go down for a nap.
They toss toys back and forth between their cribs.
Pen and Lindsey, their parents, have learned to just let this play and noise abound.

Recently, this chatter and play was happening, but in a little different way.
Eliza was just carrying on — singing, talking loudly, shouting at Tyler, —
calling him “*Bubba*” as she usually does.
Tyler was not making much noise at all.
But then, Pen and Lindsey heard something strange: —
bump, bump, bump — and then screaming from Eliza!
Running, they found Tyler, bouncing on his bottom on the way down the stairs.
He had climbed out of his crib, opened the door, —
and fled from his effusively noisy sister.
Eliza was standing in her crib, tears running down her cheeks, —
bellowing out at the top of her lungs, —
“*Bubba’s left me! Bubba’s left me!*”

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Thomas is called “the Twin.”
I wonder if he is our twin.
And like Eliza, I wonder if we are troubled when he is not with us.

Thomas is committed and courageous. But he wants to know.
Maybe Thomas replicates that *side of us that wants to know*, —
that part of us that is squeamish about mystery, —
that wants the mystery solved.
And *what a mystery* we celebrated just last week!
Jesus, crucified, dead, buried has been raised up from the grave!
There are fantastic stories about Jesus: —
miracles of healing, walking on water, turning water into wine.
But this!?
Nothing in life is more certain than death.
For Jesus to be raised up out of death — —
it twists every instinct of our mind.
It cannot happen. It makes no sense. It does not fit.
We want to know. We want this solved.

We gather here and declare Sunday after Sunday, —
“*on the third day, He rose again from the dead*”
Yet even as we do so, are you, like me, anxious, troubled, —
if that twin side of you that wants to know, — wants to solve every mystery, —
is not welcomed here
and therefore seems to have to leave you when you come here?

You don't want to be abandoned, do you — abandoned by that twin of yours
who is there trying to make sense out of all of this, —
trying to know how can the stone have been rolled away
when the world is still pelted by rocks of racism
like we just saw expressed violently in Kansas City
and so crassly in Nevada — —
trying to know how can the stone have been rolled away
when the world is still beaten down by the stones of strife
in Ukraine, in Palestine, in Syria, in Afghanistan — —
trying to know how can the stone have been rolled away
when people are crushed under boulders of poverty?
We don't really want this treasured twin to leave us!

How can we be here and trust that Jesus, the crucified, dead and buried one,
has been raised up from death — —
how can we be here and trust Jesus is alive now
and reigns over all things, — —
how can we be here and trust no power, not even the power of death
can defeat God's purposes for our lives
and for this whole creation — —
how can we be here and trust that regardless of any circumstance we face, —
regardless of any despicable thing we have done, —
regardless of any way we have failed and squandered our life, —
that Jesus will never ever abandon us — — —
how can we be here and trust all of this
unless our twin side of ourselves who has to know, —
who has to have the mystery solved, is also with us here?

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*“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, —
and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, —
I find no way that I may trust.”*
So says honest Thomas.

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The stunningly good news is that Jesus takes our twin, Thomas, very seriously.
Jesus in no way demeans Thomas's need to know.
As one scholar notes, Jesus did not set up obstacles
by expecting Thomas to perform acts of credulity
that seemed beyond him.ⁱⁱⁱ
No! Jesus comes and stands in Thomas's midst and meets him where he is.

Did Thomas reach out and touch those nail wounds and the spear wound on Jesus' side?

We are not told.

What the text declares is that with Jesus standing in his midst, —
meeting him where he was, —

Thomas trusts boldly.

He proclaims the most profound and radical
affirmation of faith in all of scripture: —

"My Lord and my God!"

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The Risen Christ graciously met Thomas where he was.

The Risen Christ always meets us where we are.

I think he met a young couple, Sean and Pam, where they were.

This couple, not connected to any worshiping community, —
had been seeking officiants to perform their wedding.

Most they considered they found online.

Only one worked in a church.

One candidate was flowery and talked way too much
about the cosmic forces of nature pulling them together.

Another read palms.

They ended up in the study of a Presbyterian pastor.

Asking them why they had come to her, —
they said they felt like something was missing.

They couldn't quite name it.

Sean told the pastor that his mom was lesbian and had a long time partner.

He was scared his mom and her partner wouldn't be welcome in a church.

Pam had a toddler that did not belong to Sean.

The last time she was in church she was ten years old, and then, —
she was there only briefly.

Sean and Pam aren't alone.

Here is what a national research study found that young adult *non-church* goers
think about the present day Christian church:

91% think the church is anti-homosexual;

87% think the church is judgmental;

85% think the church is hypocritical;

64% think the church is not accepting of other faiths;

72% think the church is out of touch with reality;

68% think the church is boring;

61% think the church is confusing.^{iv}

The pastor invited Sean and Pam to a five week premarital class.

It was amazing to see what happened.

They laughed with couples about in-laws and out-laws.
They listened carefully when, through Scripture, —
the pastor talked about God doing a new thing, making a new family.
They sat down at a table with a really bright couple —
who wanted to make sure that in their own wedding liturgy
there was no direct reference to marriage being
only between a man and a woman.

When Pam picked up her son from childcare provided by the church for this class,
he asked with bright eyes when he could come back
and color with the pre-school teacher.

They came to worship, heard the pastor preach, —
and watched as three infants were baptized.

A few weeks later, Pam sent the pastor an email.

“Thanks for the class. I have a question about baptism: —
Is that only for babies, or can I be baptized too?”^v

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Like Thomas, Sean and Pam *had to know*.

And through the life of the gathered Body of Christ
evident in that Presbyterian congregation, —
the Risen Christ met them where they were.
He stood in their midst.

And they, without the whole mystery ever being resolved, —
declared, “*My Lord and my God!*”

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Thomas, is called “the Twin.”

He is indeed our twin, that side of us whom we do not want to leave us, —
that side that has to know.

He is that side of us, Jesus does not condemn, but takes seriously, honors, —
and offers exactly what is needed
to nurture trust that He is risen indeed.

We are never required to leave this twin side of ourselves behind.

We may always bring him along with us as we gather in this place.

Thomas, this, our twin, is that side of us who has to know.

Yet he is also our twin, —
the part of us who finally gets it!

Even in the face of the mystery he can never solve, —
as our own Lamar Williamson says, —

Thomas’s skepticism is overcome and swallowed up
by belief (trust), worship and praise.^{vi}

When our highly-educated minds grasp a truth
that our eloquent and well-trained tongues cannot fully articulate, —
Thomas is our twin whom we never want to have leave us.
When we dare to allow our hearts to have reasons that reason cannot know,^{vii} —
Thomas is our twin whom we never want to have leave us.
When we stand by a fresh grave able to picture the heavenly reunion
as the preacher says, “nothing — not life and not death —
can separate us from the love of God,” —
Thomas is our twin whom we never want to have leave us.
When we look at Joe who sits three pews up from us, —
and with whom we seldom agree, —
and realize that because of the water in the font we are brothers, —
Thomas is our twin whom we never want to have leave us.
When we pick up a hammer at Habitat trusting that the work we do is not in vain, —
Thomas is our twin whom we never want to have leave us.
When we for some completely illogical reason find our foot tapping
as we sing *Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Alleluia!* —
Thomas is our twin whom we never want to have leave us.

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The Risen Jesus takes our twin Thomas very seriously
and meets him where he is
and offers exactly what is needed
to nurture in him trust that *the Lord is risen*.
Thomas, being moved beyond his need to resolve every mystery, —
ends up overwhelmed with the reality that *the Lord is risen indeed!*

Like Eliza, —
we want to make sure this dear twin of ours never leaves us!

Thanks be to God. *Amen.*

Pete Peery
Black Mountain Presbyterian Church
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ⁱ Deep and lasting credit for this sermon is given to the Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin, Pastor of Burke Presbyterian Church, Burke, VA who wrote a thoughtful unpublished paper on this text. Meg is one of the best preachers in this country whom I am honored to be known as her father.

ⁱⁱ John 11:16

ⁱⁱⁱ Copenhaver, Martin B.. Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, John 20:19-31, "Pastoral Perspective," Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 396.

^{iv} Kinnaman, David. Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity and Why it Matters. Baker Books, 2007, p. 34.

^v All this from Meg Peery McLaughlin's paper.

^{vi} Williamson, Lamar. Preaching the Gospel of John: Proclaiming the Living Word. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2004, p. 284.

^{vii} Blaise Pascal quote