Second Sunday of Easter

Old St. Patrick’s Church, 2021

Today’s gospel relates a well-known tale

Featuring the lectionary’s most celebrated apostolic doubter

Who according to the gospel of John

Engineered a stunning pivot

From doubter to believer …

A reversal whose suddenness and velocity was so spectacular

It certainly rendered other masters of the pivot

– From snowboarding’s flying tomato

To diving legend Greg Louganis –

At least slightly envious.

Without a doubt, this gospel is very much about Thomas’ faith

But it strikes me as naïve to think

That his believing began in earnest

When he finally came face to face with the risen Lord.

I don’t think Thomas was that – dare I say – “shallow.”

The gospels actually depict him as quite daring

And very unvarnished.

An episode a little earlier in the gospel of John comes to mind.

During the last supper discourse in chapter 14 of John

Jesus is waxing on about him going ahead

To prepare a place.

He concludes this part of his speech

By saying to his inner circle

“and you know the way where I am going.”

Apparently, all of the disciples were nodding their heads

Agreeing to something they clearly did not understand

Like so many undergraduates in their first physics’ lecture.

But undeterred Thomas unmasks the elephant

In the room.

The poet Malcolm Guite thus deems him the

Courageous master of the awkward question

[who] spoke the words the others dared not say

…cut[ting] through their evasion and abstraction[[1]](#endnote-1)

By blurting out – but we don’t know where you are going

So how can we know the way?

Candid Thomas

Straightforward Thomas

Guileless Thomas

Was a blunt pursuer of truth

A discerning disciple of true faith

And my instinct is that it was his long pursuit

of a flesh and blood faith

that brought him to this culminating credal moment

rather than assuming that this one individual encounter

birthed his legendary faith.

And how had Thomas evolved as a faith-seeker?

And what might his journey have to teach us

About our own credal pursuits?

One unlikely clue might reside in the very meaning of his name

Which at it root means “twin.”

The New Testament actually doubles down on his twinness

When it calls him Thomas Didymus

Which could be translated as Twin the Twin.

I think there might be something there worth pondering.

Just something like 3% of all live births in the U.S. produce twins

So, if you are a twin, you are in a very select population.

If you are an identical twin you are .45% of the population

A 1 in 250 phenomenon.

Twins have a national twin day – the 18th of December

And are hosted at a variety of festivals

The largest of which occurs, where else, but in “Twinsburg” Ohio

annually drawing somewhere around 2,000 sets of twins.

Such gatherings generate innumerable stories

Of double takes and mistaken identities

Of amusing gaffs and well-planned deceptions.

One twin related going down an escalator, looked across

And saw his twin brother.

He got very excited and yelled “hey bro”

Waving for his attention.

It turns out, he was waving at himself in a mirror.

Another set of twins would always shop for clothes together

Twin 1 would find an item she liked

then twin 2 would go into the changing room

Come out and model for her

So she could see how it looked on her.

Of course, there are endless stories

Of twins substituting for each other on dates

Taking each other’s driving exams

And even applying for jobs for each other.

I had one such experience teaching at Notre Dame years ago:

twin brothers would often sign each other in for attendance

Their mistake, however, was signing two names

When there was no identical face in the room.

That practice didn’t survive very long.

Apart from the funny or embarrassing stories

Of mistaken identities or disastrous dates

There are also twin tales from the dark side.

One of the most disturbing was a study of twins

Conducted in the 1960’s and 1970’s

By two psychologists who worked

With a now defunct adoption agency.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Without the consent of participants or their adoptive families

the agency and researchers

separated twins and placed them with different families

never disclosing that the child had a twin

or in one celebrate case, was a triplet.

The researchers monitored the separated siblings for decades

Under the pretense of ensuring that each was doing well

In their respective families.

The study abruptly ended in 1990, with records sealed until 2065

and only limited information shared:

One woman discovered she had a twin when she was 49.

Various news reports and documentaries

Brought the unethical behavior of the researchers to light

For example, the productions *Three Identical Strangers*

and *The Twinning Reaction.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

While these films clearly documented the palpable joy

of twins and even triplets discovering each other

they also revealed the profound grief and anger that emerged

when learning about a severed life.

One twin noted that her sister “should’ve been the closest

Person to me in the world, and she wasn’t.”

Twin expert Professor Nancy Segal concurred

That the damage done by separating twins & triplets at birth

Is immeasurable.

I have often wondered what drove Thomas

Out of that apostolic cave

Where he had been huddling with the other disciples.

I doubt whether he was just stepping out for some fresh air,

needed to pick up some groceries for the boys,

Or had to check in on his pets.

In my imagination, Thomas abandoned the hideaway

Because his twinning impulse, his twinning instincts kicked in.

So, he was out on the streets

Not looking for his own biological sibling

But searching out Jesus’ twins:

Those who bore in their flesh or in on their souls

fresh marks of crucifixion.

Thomas had heard the story from Peter

About seeing the resurrected Lord

And probably knew the report of Mary Magdalene

Who had mistaken Jesus for the gardener

He was unconvinced, however,

Maybe because their stories

Did not report the scars, the wounds

The marks of violence that remained even after resurrection

I imagine Thomas long pondered Jesus’ Last supper response

To his awkward admission about not knowing the way.

Jesus answered that he was the way and truth and life

and the events of the Friday we call good

had clarified for Thomas that this redemptive path

led directly through Calvary.

I think Thomas had come to have faith through the wounds

As incontrovertible signs of a resurrection path.

Thus, he set out on a journey to touch the wounds,

To stand in solidarity with victims of racism

On the streets of New York and Minneapolis,

To weep with the survivors and grieve the losses

In Atlanta, and Houston and Orange,

To lament the starvation of Children in Yemen

And the military oppression in Myanmar.

And when he finally returned to that apostolic hideaway

Thomas could profess faith

In a Lord whose body was yet scarred and disfigured

Because he had comforted and consoled Jesus’ twins

who had suffered their own passion

and whose souls were thus forever welded together

with the Only Begotten in the sting of crucifixion

And the promise of resurrection.

My instinct is that is why Thomas didn’t need

to touch anew the wounds of the risen one

For he had already touched the wounds of Jesus’ twins …

Thomas recognized the authenticity of the Christ

For his resurrection did not erase the scars of his suffering

Nor would it stop the scarring and suffering

Of all other seeking eternal life.

Rather Thomas came to understand

that true resurrection

Always bears the marks of both hurt and hope.

Quite a few years ago,

I had the opportunity to visit South Africa and Zimbabwe

One memory that remains fresh is meeting Fr. Michael Lapsley.

Born in New Zealand, he joined a missionary community

and was transferred to South Africa in 1973.

Lapsley was expelled from South Africa 4 years later.

lived for a while among exiles in Lesotho

then moving to Zimbabwe where he lived with armed guards since he was on a South African Government hit list.

In April of 1990, right after the announcement

that Nelson Mandela was to be released from prison

he received a package from South Africa.

The letter bomb hidden inside religious journals

severed his hands, blinded him in one eye,

and damaged his sight in the other.

All his senses were altered, including his sense of mission.

His maimed body, however, did not prevent his resurrection

Rather, it allowed him to render the bombing a redemptive act.

He said that he always grieves, especially for his hands

But that he is no longer a victim nor even simply a survivor

He calls himself a victor, over evil, hatred and even death.

So claims the founder

of the Institute for the Healing of Memories.

I understand that it’s Easter,

and all of us would like to put Good Friday behind us.

I understand that it’s starting to feel like spring

And we would like to put

this winter of discontent permanently to rest.

I understand vaccines are increasingly in the offing

And we’d like to stop worrying about this pandemic

And get back to the living we remember.

But wounds yet abound:

In the victims of violence

Who will forever carry the scars of their assaults,

In the millions of school age kids

Disfigured by disrupted learning and peer isolation,

In the unemployed

Whose deformed finances and mutilated careers

May never recover,

And in the grieving:

Those innumerable family and friends

Whose lives will have an unhealable ache

Whose hears have an unpatchable hole

Because of a beloved lost to COVID.

The hard truth and great promise of resurrection,

As our spiritual twin Thomas understood all too well,

Is that rising from the grave does not erase nail marks

Vacating a tomb does not vacate the pain of violence and loss

And conquering death does not remove death

From our future agenda.

Rather resurrection offers us the same courage

The same zeal

The same faith as our sibling Thomas

To touch the wounds

acknowledge the scars

and in doing so recognize the resurrected one in our midst

wounded yet Risen

our promise and our hope,

whose mission we pledge to continue

forever and ever.

1. https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2012/07/02/a-sonnet-for-st-thomas-the-apostle/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. [Records from controversial twin study sealed at Yale until 2065 (yaledailynews.com)](https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2018/10/01/records-from-controversial-twin-study-sealed-at-yale-until-2065/#:~:text=The%20study%2C%20conducted%20by%20child,adoption%20agency%20Louise%20Wise%20Services) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7664504/> and <https://jfi.org/watch-online/jfi-on-demand/the-twinning-reaction> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)