

## **Message for April 11, 2021**

### **John 20:19-29**

One thing that has long fascinated me are some of the “folksy” expressions that people commonly use that don’t seem to make a great deal of sense at first. Take “to turn a blind eye” for example. We all know what this expression means, to pretend that something isn’t there or is not happening, but where did it ever come from?

It is said that this phrase originated with the great naval hero, Horatio Nelson. It was during the pivotal naval battle of Copenhagen and Nelson was ordered to retreat, an order that he strongly disagreed with. Nelson’s response was to hold his telescope up to his eye that had been blinded in a previous battle and then claim that he couldn’t see the signal; hence the origin of “turn a blind eye”.

Another common expression is to “shed crocodile tears”. This of course refers to a person who says that they feel sorry or sympathetic when they really don’t. This phrase originated 600 years ago in the Middle Ages and comes from a popular book; “The Travels of Sir John Mandeville”. The book told the adventures of a man who claimed to have traveled all over, and in it Mandeville falsely said that serpents or crocodiles cry when they kill and eat their prey. The truth of course is that they feel no pity at all for the creatures that they are about to eat, and this is where that expression comes from.

To turn to another common expression, the phrase “to paint the town red” dates back about 200 years. One night an English aristocrat, the Marquis of Waterford, along with some friends got riotously drunk in the town of Melton Mowbray. They got up to all sorts of mischief and literally painted the tollgate and some people’s front doors red. They thought that this was all great fun but later a very contrite Marquis paid to repair all of the damage. Even so the expression “paint the town red” stuck. And similarly so, a common expression is associated with a principal character in today’s scripture passage and it is all because of one action.

It was the evening of the very first Easter Sunday and Jesus appeared before the disciples. Thomas however was not present and so he missed seeing the Risen Christ. Naturally when he returned, the rest of the disciples couldn't wait to tell him all about it. But what was Thomas' response? He was skeptical to say the least. He didn't come right out and say that the others had imagined the whole thing but nevertheless he certainly wasn't going to take their word for it either. As he famously said: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger where the nail marks were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe".

A week later the disciples once again gathered together and this time Thomas was there. Once again Jesus appeared and when he did so, he spoke directly to Thomas. "Put your finger here: see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe". Thomas's response was to stand there utterly shocked and dumbfounded. Then, when he had found his voice, he uttered what many Biblical scholars say is the climax or high point of John's entire gospel: "My lord and my God!" This is the climax of John's gospel, but what is Thomas best known for today? Not these tremendous words of faith. Rather he is best known for his skepticism; indeed we sometimes refer to a skeptical person as being a "Doubting Thomas". Truly Thomas' reputation is not the best but, like many other less than wonderful reputations, it's not entirely deserved.

The gospels do not tell us a lot about Thomas but what little they do say gives us a good idea of what he was like. We know from today's lesson that he was skeptical by nature, but we also know that he sought the truth and wasn't afraid to ask questions either.

There was the time for example when Jesus was talking to the disciples and spoke about there being many dwelling places in his Father's house and that he was going on ahead to prepare a place for them. The rest of the disciples wouldn't admit that they didn't have a clue as to what Jesus was talking about, but Thomas didn't hesitate to ask, "Lord, we do not know where you are going so how can we know the way?" This prompted Jesus to utter one of his most famous statements of all: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me". And there was also the time when Jesus announced

that he had to return to Judea because his good friend Lazarus had just died. The rest of the disciples did their best to talk Jesus out of going: didn't he remember what had happened the last time he had been in Judea? He had almost been killed by a mob! All of the disciples but one tried to talk Jesus out of going fearing for both his and their own safety. The one exception was Thomas. "Let us also go" he said, "that we might die with him". Thomas was a man of courage and of the twelve disciples, he was the only one willing to go with Jesus. In fact it was because of his courage that Thomas even missed seeing the resurrected Christ on that first Easter evening.

After the death of Jesus, the disciples were terrified and for good reason; the authorities had killed their master and who was to say that they wouldn't come after them as well? The disciples then went into hiding and were afraid to venture out. Once again however there was one exception. Only Thomas was brave enough to walk the city streets.

In the eyes of many people Thomas has a bit of a bad reputation because of his skepticism on that first Easter evening but a lot of it is not deserved. Thomas was brave, loyal and even willing to die for what he believed in but belief was the key. He wouldn't believe something just because he was told to; he needed to be convinced. But once he was convinced, there was no reserve or hanging back. The disciple Thomas may be forever associated with the phrase 'Doubting Thomas', and that is certainly not a compliment, but there is a lot to admire about the man. In fact the noted Scottish scholar of days gone by, William Barclay, even held Thomas up as a role model for all of us:

"He absolutely refused to say that he understood what he did not understand, or that he believed what he did not believe. There is an uncompromising honesty about him."

Barclay went on to write:

"There is more ultimate faith in the man who insists on being sure than in the man who glibly repeats things he has never thought out and which he may not really believe."

When it comes to religious beliefs people sometimes take a stern line and say that in order to be a 'real Christian', a person must believe certain things without question. There can be no doubt that Christianity does involve holding certain core beliefs. It would be hard if not impossible for example to be a Christian if the person did not believe that Jesus ever existed or that the resurrection, however it may be understood, did not take place. So often though people seem to fear questioning, failing to realize that God's truth will withstand any questions that we may ever ask. Indeed I sometimes wonder if our fear of questioning may reflect a lack of security and faith on our part. Growing in faith and developing a strong faith that will withstand the storms of life, including the one that we are now caught up in, is a process and a part of that process is questioning and wondering, working things out for ourselves.

To return to today's lesson, who was the one who uttered the words said to be the climax of John's gospel? It wasn't Peter, the rock upon which the church would be built. Nor was it any of the other ten disciples either. Rather it was Thomas who was the first to dare proclaim who and what the Risen Christ is, and he didn't do so because of what the others told him. He did this because his questions and doubts were answered. He did this because he had worked things out for himself. In fact it was his deep faith and conviction that, according to ancient tradition, motivated him to become the very first missionary to go to the land we now call India. It is said that he was martyred there for his beliefs about forty years after the resurrection, and for this reason many Indian Christians call Thomas the patron saint of India.

It is very ironical then that to this very day Thomas is referred to as 'Doubting Thomas' and that this term is often used to describe people who are unduly skeptical. The reality is that despite his initial skepticism, Thomas developed a tremendous faith and can show us the way to a stronger, better faith, a faith that we certainly need today in these difficult, challenging times.

## Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, on this Sunday after Easter there is so much for which we can and should be grateful for. There is this early spring; the warmth and longer days; all that nourishes our minds, bodies, and souls; our families and friends; all the people so dear to us.

We thank you too for the promise of what we celebrated last week, giving thanks that the resurrection is not just about what happened in Jerusalem so long ago nor is it just about what will happen some time in the future. We thank you for what the resurrection means for us here and now; that through the Spirit your Son is a living, present reality in our lives here and now.

With this in mind, we pray for healing for those who are ill; comfort for those who mourn; strength for those who fear what the future may or may not have in store.

As the Third Wave tightens its grip, we pray for those on the front lines and those in position of authority, that you will bless them with your courage and strength. We pray too for a swift, effective roll-out of the vaccines.

Grant us all the courage, strength, and peace that only you can.

We ask this in your Son's name. Amen