

Where was Thomas, anyway?

How did he miss this? Was he just late? The disciples were in hiding from the Jewish leaders who had just killed their Rabbouni, which Mary Magdalene reminded us just last week, means teacher.

The disciples were hiding because they feared they were next in this effort at the highest levels to make the world forget about Jesus of Nazareth. Why wasn't Thomas locked up in that room with them too?

Had he ventured out, dangerous as it was? Maybe he wanted to see the empty tomb like Mary and Simon Peter and the unnamed disciple "whom Jesus loved."

Maybe he *still* thought someone had stolen the body and had gone looking for it and/or revenge.

Maybe he thought the whole glorious experiment of bringing hope, food, community and healing to the despairing, hungry, isolated and wounded people of God was just not sustainable anymore. Jesus was gone, after all. Somebody, maybe Thomas, must have looked around at that unlikely group of no-name, working class, misfits and social outcasts and saw no hope of carrying Jesus' message and mission forward.

Maybe there was in-fighting ... between those who wanted to hide and those who wanted to fight or get as far from Jerusalem as they could; between those who

believed Mary's proclamation – "I have seen the Lord!" – and those who thought that couldn't possibly be true. Even though, Jesus was pretty clear about what those first Easter people should expect. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth..." lifted to the cross and then lifted even from the tomb ... "I will draw all people to myself," (John 12:32) Jesus said in the presence of this assembly just about a month ago.

Still, we know it took some time for the disciples to comprehend all this and so, I think we can *suppose with confidence* there were some lively debates over the situation ... just as there would be if it were us there, locked in that room, frightened, confused, trying to figure out what to do, trying to figure out what it means to be Jesus' disciples without the physical presence of Jesus.

Not the easiest time to be a disciple. And yet, being a disciple is what these texts appointed for the seven weeks of Easter Season in the church are all about. We will hear from The Acts of the Apostles, those first stories of how Jesus' disciples *did* continue the mission after the strange and alarming events that took place in that locked room.

We will also hear from 1 John, a favorite book of Christian living and loving for many of us. From these two books will come themes of forgiveness for one another through the risen Christ, love in truth and action, reading the scriptures in

community, and the radically inclusive invitation to be a Jesus-follower, just to name a few.

And today, for our consideration in what it means to be a disciple, we have the lovely Psalm 133. A psalm of unity. It is one of my favorites, and it seems like I learn something new in its beautiful brevity each time I study it. This time around, I learned that the imagery of the poem represents both the northern and southern kingdoms of Judah, people who were related by blood, but rarely lived in unity, because it's hard for divided people to unify. Yet that is what our God has asked of humanity from the beginning. And in this Psalm, we find it is in that unity that God's promise most powerfully takes shape: Life forevermore.

I think it's interesting to look at our Gospel reading today with the lens of unity, of what is good and pleasant in the eyes of God, and how that might further our understanding of what it means to be Jesus' disciples without the physical presence of Jesus.

There is a demonstration here of what Jesus taught the disciples when he appeared the first time. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven... if not they are retained" and they will continue to be burdens.

There is a picture of unity here. Thomas wasn't there. For whatever reason, he missed it the first time Jesus appeared in that locked room. And then when

Thomas comes back, and they tell him what's happened – “We have seen the Lord!” (20.25) – Thomas doesn't believe them.

Think about that for just a second. Imagine you and some of your closest friends or family have had this incredible, mystical shared experience. When another of your close bunch comes along and you tell them about it, they basically just say, no, I do not believe you. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hands in his side, I will not believe,” Thomas said. (20.25)

I know people who have fallen out over far less. I suspect you do too. I think the tension was probably thick in that locked room and I don't think it felt like kindred living in unity all the time.

But ... look at what happens next. Seven days pass, including a time of worship together. The disciples were still locked away in that room – they still controlled who came in and out. Well, for the most part. They still controlled what mere mortals entered the room, including Thomas. And yet, he is there with them.

That's noteworthy, I think. Because, let's be honest, when there is tension between people, when it becomes hard to see how kindred can live in unity, we can go a lot of ways that would not result in Thomas being in that room one week later, hiding out with the rest of the disciples. I'm sure after Thomas missed everything and then tried to tell the disciples they must be suffering from some form of mass

delusion; it would have been tempting to kick him out of the inner circle.

Remember, Jesus had just been betrayed by one of them. Judas also spoke of his unbelief. The weight of what Judas did still hung heavily in the air.

But they didn't kick Thomas out and lock the door or anything like that. "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them."

(20.26) As hard as it must have been, the disciples remained united, including the unbelieving disciple, Thomas.

And Jesus does come back. And his words and actions affirm the disciples' treatment of Thomas, they affirm the disciple's call, our call, to be kindred living in unity.

We spent some time with this text at our council meeting earlier this week, and one person noted that in her memory of this story, Jesus responded to Thomas' unbelief by kind of scolding him. But in reading it through twice and spending a little time noticing what catches your attention, she said she realized Jesus was not scolding Thomas at all. "Peace be with you," he begins. And then he invites Thomas, very personally, very intimately to touch him and see him. "Do not doubt but believe," he says. A more accurate and perhaps even more inviting translation is "Do not be unbelieving but believe."

Even in Thomas' unbelief, he still belonged. He was still part of the first Easter people and had been prepared for this moment just like the rest of them.

This is an indispensable part of what gave the new religion of Christianity the wherewithal to survive those beginning years, those first Easters. It was vastly different from the multitude of other religious movements trying to attract people because it tended toward unity and inclusion, instead of division and exclusion. It reached out especially to those no one else wanted to see or be in community with, like the poor and the sick, the alienated, the sinners, the enslaved, women, people with questions and varying degrees of belief and unbelief.

Now, I must make a note here. When I speak of seeking unity wherever possible, I am talking about healthy relationships and situations. This cornerstone of discipleship does not mean anyone who is being abused is responsible for seeking unity with their abuser. And since I'm making that clarification, I want to say that if you are being abused or threatened in any way, physically, sexually, emotionally, financially: it is not your fault and there are people who care and want to help. Please reach out to a counselor, a teacher, a pastor or someone you trust. In the U.P., you can get help from local agencies and easy to use websites like www.dailhelp.org.

So, to sum up, a tenacious and realistic tendency toward unity and by extension, a reminder not to be judgmental about where others are in their belief ... or their unbelief. These are among the foundational lessons of discipleship this Season of Easter. It's a great start, isn't it? There's more to come!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed!** Alleluia!

Amen.