

WGUMC April 12, 2015
John 20:19-29

"Holy Hearsay"

It's the Sunday after Easter, and it's time for Thomas. Every year on this Sunday, the lectionary gives us the same story. It would seem that Thomas is pretty important. Too bad we don't know much about him. He really stands out only in John's Gospel. There he's called "Thomas the Twin," and he speaks for the first time when Jesus is just about to leave to go raise his friend Lazarus. Jesus says, "Lazarus is dead...let us go to him." And Thomas says, with a large dose of sarcasm, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." [John 11:14-16]

The next time Thomas appears is when Jesus is saying his good-bye to his disciples, and he's telling them about his Abba's house. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas, who has been following Jesus for a long time, still doesn't get it. He says to Jesus, "Lord, we do not

know where you are going. How can we know the way?" [John 14:3-5]

That's it. That's what we know about Thomas. He's sarcastic and clueless. I'm thinking that we should call him not Thomas the Twin, but maybe Thomas the Tween, because he sounds like a lot of tweens I know. One thing is for certain, Thomas is be-tween; he is between worlds. As we find him on Easter Day, Thomas is between what was his life on the road with an itinerant rabbi and life on the run from all the fear and uncertainty about what is going on and where he's going now that he and the rest of the disciples are alone. He hasn't had time to process the fact that Jesus died, so he's in no shape to entertain the possibility that his Lord is alive.

You could also say that Thomas is a tween because he has a faith that has to grow up fast. Somehow he has to get from a faith that just wants to hang with Jesus to one that is willing to hang for him. It reminds me of the transition we all

have to make from a childish faith to adult belief. And that's a transition that's getting harder and harder to make.

Our Sunday School faith—that assures us that God loves us and that God will always be there for us and provides milk and cookies for us—is not a faith that is very well equipped to face the onslaught of adolescence. What with the growing awareness of evil in the world and all the strikes against our own egos, a second-grade faith is not likely to survive middle school. So when young people find that faith to be inadequate, they too often just give up on it.

It happened to my husband. He told me that he had to give up his childish view of God and become an atheist before he could become a believer. Unfortunately, a lot of young people today don't work that hard and don't get that far.

The Barna Research Group, based in Ventura, spent four years studying why young people are dropping out of church, and they documented the sobering truth that the majority of

teens who are active in their churches now will disconnect permanently or for an extended period of time in their adult life. Ten percent will lose their faith in Christ altogether. Barna calls them, sympathetically, the Prodigals. But many more, 40%, will simply wander away from participation in any established faith community. These are the Nomads. Another 20% will feel lost, caught between the culture of the church they grew up in and the society they have to live in. They are the Exiles. In the end, only 30% will stay in the church throughout their twenties.

[<https://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/534-five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts>]

Church leaders and parents ask, "Why do they leave?" And Barna tells us that there are a whole variety of reasons. "Church is boring," is the one most of us parents hear, but isn't really the big one. I can attest to the fact that church has always been boring. So is school, but you don't see kids deciding not to go to college. Kids go to college because they

believe it will be life-changing. Maybe they don't go to church because they don't see changed lives.

According to Barna, this is what they see: churches being overprotective. Teens and young adults have unprecedented access to ideas and worldviews that are way beyond anything we were exposed to. By contrast, the worldview of churches is often "stifling, fear-based and risk-averse." But young people have no patience for a church that is ignoring the problems of the world they live in.

Another thing that bothers young people about churches is that the faith doesn't seem to be real. It's not enough just to talk about God in church. You have to be able to experience God here. And our young people would tell us, if we would listen, that most of the Christians they know don't seem to know God and don't appear to be trying very hard to get to know God. Without examples of living faith in their churches, no wonder they leave. There's little reason to stay.

But there are other reasons they drop out. Young adults are turned off by the culture wars. They don't have a problem with science. They wonder why we are hung up about sex. And they increasingly reject the exclusivist claims that are made by their churches. They go to school and work with people of many different religions and no religion. And they will leave a church that expects them to choose between their faith and their friends.

If those aren't reasons enough, young people today say that church is not a place where they can safely ask questions or express their doubts. [https://www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church#.VShe31z_4Vv] In that sense, young adults are the Thomas's of today. They have just the beginnings of faith. They have lots of questions and doubts. They want proof that Christ is alive and that following him can change your life. And they don't necessarily trust people who say they saw Jesus. By the time they are in their twenties,

they've been lied to by lots of people. Why should they believe someone telling them that Jesus has risen from the dead? No, like Thomas, they want a Christ they can see and hear and touch. What can we do for them? What would Jesus do?

Look at the text. When Jesus first appeared to the disciples—the ones who had betrayed him, denied him, and ran away from him—he didn't condemn them. No. To the men who had disappointed him, doubted him (and they all doubted him), Jesus said this: "Peace be with you" because he didn't come to condemn the world but to save it. [John 3:17]

But Thomas wasn't there when Jesus first appeared, and he refused to believe what the other disciples had seen. So the next week, when Thomas was with them, Jesus came again. But he didn't say, shame on you, Thomas. Again, he said, "Peace be with you." And we can do that, too. We can make church a safe place for young doubters like Thomas, for those with a small faith and big questions, for those who have run

away or wandered off and are wondering whether its worth it to come back. But that's not all we must do.

After Jesus offered them peace, he turned to Thomas to give him what he needed. What he needed was to see for himself, to have an experience of his own, and not one borrowed from somebody else. So Jesus said, "Put your finger here and see my hands...."

In like fashion, I believe that we have to give our young adults what they need, what they've been missing, and that is their own experience of the living Christ. The only thing is that we can't give what we don't have. We have to ask ourselves: why is it that our youth are more likely to meet Christ doing mission work in the Tenderloin or on an Indian Reservation than they are to meet him in worship on a Sunday morning? Now maybe they miss it because they are too close to it here. But then again, maybe they miss it because they can't see us living it.

For parents, this is the challenge. A different study last year found that for teens who remained active in the church into adulthood, the biggest influence on their faith was not their youth pastor or the mission trips but having parents who lived out their faith and talked about it at home. The lead researcher concluded, "Parents, for better or worse, are actually the most influential pastors...of their children. Parents set a kind of glass ceiling of religious commitment, above which their children rarely rise." [from the Association of Religion Data Archives, quoted in *The Christian Century*, Dec. 24, 2014]

That's why it's so important that we have a faith that our young people can see. Maybe they can't see Jesus, but you better believe they are watching us. So we adults need a grownup faith that stumbles through the darkness, holds on despite the doubt and discovers what it means to believe even when we don't know and can't see.

The young adults who are wondering whether faith is real and church is worth it don't want our preaching. They don't want to hear a pious report of the risen Lord. They want to know that they can experience Christ for themselves. They want to put their finger in the mark of the nails and reach out and put their hand in the side of the living Christ. And they want to be with people who are demanding the same.

Their desire is captured in a song by Sydney Carter. Carter is the one who wrote *Lord of the Dance*. But he also wrote a song called "Present Tense." You'll know why this one didn't make it into our hymnal.

Your holy hearsay is not evidence;
Give me the good news in the present tense.
What happened nineteen hundred years ago
May not have happened: how am I to know?

The living truth is what I long to see;
I cannot lean upon what used to be.
So shut the Bible up and show me how
The Christ you talk about is living now.
Sydney Carter, ©1971 Stainer & Bell, Ltd.

No one needs our holy hearsay. Like Thomas, they just need someone to show them the way. It's our job to show them a faith worth living for and a love worth dying for, until one day they can say for themselves: "My Lord and my God!"