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HOW TO HANDLE A RISEN LORD

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It is usually a happy occasion—The Feast of Dedication. The weather is wintry, so Jesus takes his morning stroll in the Temple, in the Porch of Solomon. A crowd gathers, a crowd with a question: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (John 10:24).¹ Jesus answers. Oh, does He ever answer! He ends His reply with these words: “The Father and I are one” (10:30).

Jesus’ audience analysis seems deficient. He hardly shapes the speech for these hearers. These died-in-the-wool monotheists do not take kindly at all to His concluding line. His auditors react instinctively. Rigid fingers swoop to the ground and when they rise, it is to menace stones alongside furious faces.

Jesus and His disciples escape. They go across the Jordan to John's baptismal site and they stay there. Fists clenched around jagged rocks and faces tensed by livid rage are not easily forgotten. And when Jesus says, “Let us go to Judea again,” the reaction is predictable: “Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” (11:7)

¹All passages are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version and, unless otherwise noted, are from the Gospel of John. I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Denis Fortin, for reading this presentation in printed form and offering helpful suggestions.

And just here we gain the first glimpse of a shadowy personality, the disciple Thomas. John 11:16 says: “Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’” The Cross may catch the others by surprise. But not Thomas. He senses the seriousness of the hour. He knows that Jesus will die. And he alone has the courage to say, “Let's go. Let's go die with Him!”

At the time you might have labeled Thomas a pessimist. But it just so happened that he was right. He did know Jesus' destiny. With hindsight you might call him a realist. Thomas has a way of sorting out things, of discarding the peripheral and getting at the central. He does not allow the emotional high of the moment to cloud his judgment and inhibit careful analysis.

Thomas makes another appearance. In the Upper Room Jesus speaks one of the great promises of Scripture: “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (14:3). To the promise, Jesus adds a comment. He says: “And you know the way to the place where I am going” (14:3). The aura of the Upper Room may spellbind some. But not Thomas. The mysterious ambience may mesmerize the others. But not Thomas. Even the farewell conversation of Jesus is subject to his mental scrutiny. No presupposition slips past unnoticed.

“And you know the way to the place where I am going”? “Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’” (14:5) “Lord, we don't know the destination. How can we know how to get there?” The logic is clear, the syllogism perfect: To know the route we must know the destination. We do not know the destination. Therefore we do not know the route.

I would have loved to have had this young adult as a student. True, he would probe any ambiguity in the course outline. But he would be disciplined in his thought. He would be the kind of student from whom teachers learn the most. Thomas would not respond to Ed McMahon.² He would not waste a postage stamp on those odds. Thomas is a telemarketer's nightmare. Thomas looks for the straight story. He does not listen to the twisted tale.

But do not misunderstand Thomas. He may be pessimistic, but he's loyal. He may doubt, but he loves. When Jesus dies, he does not gloat. The phrase "I told you so" is crowded from a mind filled with grief. The Gospels do not say so, but I think Thomas participates in the burial of Jesus. Somehow, I think Thomas is there. I think he holds the limp, lifeless hand of his Lord. I think he feels the nail wound in that hand. I think the slack arm of Jesus vibrates with the sobs of one who mourned His loss. I think Thomas places his hand in the spear wound and mingles his tears with Christ's blood. Do not misunderstand Thomas. You may call Thomas a Doubter. Please understand—Thomas is a Lover. Thomas loves Jesus.

How do you react to disappointment, to loss, to grief? Do you lose yourself in the crowd? Do you covet the presence of friends? Or do you like to be alone, to work it through in sequestered solitude? Thomas grieves alone. When the disciples gather he is not there. It is not that he does not care. He wishes to sob in secret, to mourn in seclusion. He does not go to the Upper Room. And when Jesus comes to the Upper Room Thomas is not there.

However, even a solitary mourner must eventually go to the market for bread. Thomas slips out, selects his loaf and waits to pay the merchant. As he waits he sees a couple of the

²McMahon, an entertainer, is spokesperson for a mail order business in the United States which lures customers through a widely advertised "sweepstakes" giveaway.

others strolling through the market. He hides his face, but not in time. He hears the unwelcome syllables of his own name. “Thomas, Thomas! We have seen the Lord!” Thomas responds with a few terse questions. The two give bumbling, if enthusiastic, responses. And Thomas slips back to his hideaway, the dismal victor. On a trip to the well, Thomas is confronted with the same news. And he poses his incisive questions. Time and again he is faced with the message: “We have seen the Lord.” The pressure in his analytical mind builds. The testimonial evidence is delivered with great fervor and by a variety of people. Are they all deluded? Are they all overwhelmed by some mass hysteria? How does one know, how does one decide?

Finally, his response spews forth. Someone announces the news one too many times and Thomas flings down the rational gauntlet: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (20:25). It is a strident statement. You may see in it a number of features: Independence of thought; elitism; the wounded emotions of one who feels left out; a demand for empirical evidence; distrust of the women and men who bore testimony to the Risen Lord.

Whatever else you may see, surely there is evident in Thomas's statement, a deep love for his Lord and a heart-rending grief at His death. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” We can admire Thomas for his statement on other grounds as well. Thomas will allow no fussy-headed thinking. He is a practitioner of critical thought, the patron saint of the scientific method. He is not going to swallow the first rumor. Bravo, Thomas! We academicians love you!

For a week, no one successfully answers Thomas. No one picks up the gauntlet. Jesus is about to send His followers into all the world to win to faith in the Risen Lord millions who have

never seen Him. But just now the Christian mission is stalled in its first attempt, an attempt to win one of Jesus' own to faith in Him as the Risen One. For a whole week, Thomas's assertion stands. In the mean time, he cannot resist the temptation to sort the evidence, to expose false reasoning and shoddy argumentation, and, perhaps, to nurse a flame of hope.

So Thomas comes to the Upper Room. I wonder, does Jesus wait a week in order to let Thomas brood in his doubt? Or does Jesus come to Thomas just as soon as he comes to the Upper Room? I like to think it was the latter. Jesus cannot appear to Thomas alone for fear that He may confirm his isolationist faith. He waits for Thomas to climb the stairs . . . and then He comes.

The doors are shut. And suddenly, inexplicably, He is there. He repeats His earlier blessing, "Peace be with you" (20:26). And then he turns to Thomas and says, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (20:27). In that majestic moment, something happens to our careful thinker. Something happens to our scrutinizer of thought.

Interestingly, the Gospel does not tell us whether or not Thomas actually follows Jesus' invitation. Perhaps he did not. In the presence of the risen Christ, his request may have seemed silly, juvenile. Maybe, though, he did. It was, after all, the risen Lord who had invited him to do so. And so, perhaps, Thomas leads the others in handling their resurrected Leader. If so, we may have a reflection of that event in 1 John 1:1: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life."

While the Gospel does not tell us whether Thomas handled the Lord, it does give us the grand, verbal response of Thomas, arguably the greatest confession of the divinity of Jesus in all the Gospels: “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” Thomas sees, in the scarred form of the Risen Lord, the Ruler of All Things. The one who doubts most thoroughly, believes most completely. Does Thomas take a leap of faith? Does his response now outstrip the evidence before him? Perhaps it was not a leap of faith at all. Perhaps Thomas, who can question presuppositions so closely, can trace quickly the trajectory of faith.

We academicians often function in a challenging, even threatening environment. We worry that our latest lecture or scholarly paper may be judged to be ill-informed rather than erudite. To avoid such conclusions, we offer long caveats and note carefully the limits of our research. However, there is an even greater threat than being perceived as naive. We may miss the moment to believe. To his credit, Thomas does not miss that moment. And by the grace of our risen Lord, neither will we.

Jesus is so gentle and kind to Thomas: “Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe’” (20:29). If today you worship in your heart the Risen Lord, you are blessed. If you sometimes experience with vividness the presence of Jesus in your life, you are blessed. If you handle the risen Lord, but have never touched Him, you are blessed. If you have looked upon the face of the Lord, without ever having seen Him, you are blessed.

To grasp the genius of this narrative is to compare these two striking statements of Thomas:

“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 will not believe.”

“My Lord and my God!”

I once happened on a most illuminating comment which I have applied to our story about Jesus and Thomas. I did not find this remark in any of the fine commentaries on John’s Gospel. Instead, I found it in the little best seller by H. Jackson Brown, Jr., *Life's Little Instruction Book*.³ Allow me to paraphrase instruction #332:

“Do not live your life as an explanation.”

[“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands . . .”]

“Live your life as an exclamation.”

[“My Lord and my God!”]

³(Nashville, Tenn.: Rutledge Hill, 1991).