

Tardy Thomas

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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John 20:19–31

1 John 1:1–2:2

Acts 4:32–35

I've said it before. I don't think it's fair. Thomas, the disciple, is known forever and always as "Doubting Thomas." And that's so unfair!

Sure, some of why I don't like this might be that I'm a bit sensitive to nicknames. I was saddled with a nickname when I was a kid, and I hated it. Actually, I hated it so much that I'm not going to tell you what it was. So there!

And so it goes for Thomas. He is given this nickname. He is tagged with this adjective, one that describes his reluctance to take the word of his fellow disciples when they told him that Jesus was alive.

"Doubting Thomas."

That's not fair.

I mean, just read what the Bible says about the disciples. They weren't exactly reliable. They weren't what we'd call insightful or wise — usually, mostly. *Why should* Thomas believe them? How could he *not* doubt them?

"Doubting Thomas."

Now, you may already know that I think this is not only unfair to *Thomas* but that it's also unfair to the Bible. It fails to hear what the Bible is telling us. It misunderstands the story of Thomas.

Because he came to believe. The *emphasis* of the story is not on his *doubting* but instead on his *believing*. He's misnamed: Doubting Thomas is, at the end, really, *Believing* Thomas.

Even so, at the risk of misunderstanding the story myself, at the risk of giving Thomas a nickname just as unfair, I'd like to focus on a different part of the account of Thomas, another aspect of his story, one that comes *before* he finally came to believe, maybe even before he doubted.

Because it seems that part of the situation with Thomas is that he was late. He saw Jesus later than the others. He came to believe in Jesus, or belief came for him, later than for the others, who saw Jesus, and believed in his resurrection, when Thomas was not there.

So, I'd like to call him "Tardy Thomas." That's right. Or, if you'd like, "Tardy Tom." Because he was late to the party. It was as if he came in looking for the fellowship hall, wondering where the snacks were. And once got to the party, he looked around and saw that the coffee was all gone, and all that was left of the cookies were a few forlorn crumbs.

Tardy Tom, he hadn't expected much. His friends, they had been saying some pretty strange things, some incredible things, some unbelievable things. Really. Unbelievable. As in, he could not believe them. Which didn't do a whole lot to help him feel included in this fellowship of excited disciples to which he had arrived late, as Tardy Tom. Tardiness can do that: make you feel unwelcome, separate, disconnected, alone.

But then, everything changes. Jesus arrives. The unexpected guest (or was he the host?) appears to them, and he speaks peace, generously blessing all who were there.

All of them.

Including Tom:

the doubting one,
the tardy one,
he who had been delayed,
absent,
excluded.

But no longer: now Jesus was there, with the disciples, with Thomas, blessing them all

with his presence,
with his fellowship,
with the gift of his own self,
even for the initially doubting,
even for the previously tardy.

Because it wasn't about the disciples. It wasn't about those who had booked the room, or those who had closed its doors. It certainly wasn't about

who they thought they were,
who they felt was in,
who they decided was out,
who was on time,
who was tardy.

Instead, it was about *Jesus*:

the guest,
the host,
the peace-giver,
the Holy One who so generously blesses
and whose blessing is so generous,
that it makes their joy complete,
and makes them truly his church.



Every so often, someone will ask me for directions. I'm glad to help. Because I know what it can take to ask for directions. I am, after all, a guy. And guys don't like to ask for directions. Because they want to feel included. They want to be, or appear to be, in the know, on top of things, part of the in crowd. And when they do ask, then you know it must be important. *Really* important.

Sometimes I'm asked directions here, at this church. It's not a difficult place to get around. But if you've never been here before, then it isn't immediately obvious where certain places are.

When people first come in, on a Sunday morning or for a funeral or a wedding, they usually want to know where the sanctuary is.

It's probably obvious. It's where all the people are going.

But maybe the person is really early. Or really tardy.

In any case, I try to help them out. Once they have that straight, then they will want to know where the restrooms are. And after the service, the question of course will be this one: "Where are they having coffee hour? Where's the fellowship hall?"

That's an important question, too. People really want to know where the fellowship hall is. Because that's where the food is. And the coffee. Don't be late! Believe me: don't be late. I've been delayed. Often. Again and again by the time I've gotten up there, all the goodies were gone. Oh no!

Here, at this church, it's not so hard to find the fellowship hall. But it's not obvious if you've never been here before. And so, when people ask where it is, you tell them. You say something like, "oh, it's upstairs in that building there; go down the hall, through the double doors, then up the stairs on the left."

You don't say, "I'm not telling."

You don't say, "Find it yourself."

No, you don't say those things. Because what kind of church fellowship is it if you don't want people to attend? You want people to gather together, the more the merrier.

Some churches don't make it easy. Perhaps they have poor signage. And perhaps, with that poor signage, the members, those in the know, forget to be helpful. Or aren't interested in being helpful. Or maybe the members all seem so chummy, which is nice, but the chumminess appears limited to those already on the inside, leaving outsiders and stragglers to feel even more outside or tardy.

Surely, there are Tardy Toms (and Thomasinas) even today.

In the face of all that, some who don't know won't even ask, "Where's the fellowship hall?" And those who do, feel that they're imposing on the members, on those who are in the know.

Eventually, they make it to coffee hour, although delayed, tardy. But once there, they stand there, alone, ignored, keeping their own company with a cup of coffee, as if punished for their tardiness. And they feel like they have wandered into a party in which they do not belong, and they wonder, "Why did I bother?"



All three of the Bible passages I chose to read this morning have to do with belonging. They're about relationship. They touch on that important aspect of church life often called "fellowship."

Now, the fellowship these scripture verses describe is not the casual, skin-deep kind of interaction that passes for fellowship in so many places, and (let's be honest) in too many churches, the kind of fellowship that complicates belonging rather than secures it, the kind of fellowship that defines relationship downward to the shallowest level of small talk.

No, by “fellowship,” something deeper is meant, something more substantial, something more real.

“Fellowship,” in this biblical sense, is *generous*. It is deeply, extravagantly generous. As it says in our passage from the book of Acts: “There was not a needy person among them....” The resurrection of the Lord Jesus makes a difference in how those who belong to the community of faith treat each other. For those who have known God’s generosity in Jesus Christ cannot keep it to themselves.

Because it’s not about themselves. Fellowship is not at first or mainly a horizontal thing. It’s a vertical thing. As it says in First John: “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” That’s the heart of the matter. True Christian fellowship depends upon “the Father and his Son Jesus Christ.” Our fellowship is first of all with them,

not because we reached out to God,
but because God reached down to us;
not because *we* are so good,
but because *God* is so good to *us*;
not because we have first done right,
but because Christ has first done right for us;
not because we were on time,
but because, in the fullness of time,
God in Christ rescued us who are always tardy.

This is what is basic. This is what is true. This is the core of Christian fellowship.

Christian fellowship, at its heart, is about that relationship with God, that fellowship with Jesus, possible because God made it possible, a reality because Jesus crossed heaven and earth, life and death, to make it a reality.

Christian fellowship depends on and flows from the fellowship we may now have with God. And only when we are in fellowship with Holy God can we have true fellowship with each other:

*...[I]f we walk in the light
as he himself is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus his Son
cleanses us from all sin.*

You see, it’s not really about coffee and snacks, as good as these are.

It’s not really about fun times together, parties and plays and picnics, although these are worth our celebrating.

Truly Christian fellowship is really about fellowship with Christ. It’s about the relationship we have with him, because of the relationship he made with us, both the punctual and the tardy.

Christian fellowship, then, if it is to be truly Christian, truly holy, must point back to what makes it happen: the relationship God has made with us through Jesus Christ.

If Christian fellowship doesn’t ever do this, if Christian fellowship never points toward the relationship that is its basis and its purpose, then it is not really Christian fellowship.

It is not true.

It is not holy.

It is just pretend, an act of make-believe that will eventually pass away, and before that will find itself corrupted, making distinctions between people, distinctions that Christ has overcome:

inside and outside,
welcome and unwelcome,
us and them,
worthy and unworthy,
deserving and undeserving,
old-timer and newcomer,
punctual and tardy.

Jesus has overcome these, has abolished them in his own body, with his death and resurrection. He pushes them aside as he greets all us Thomases ... and Thomasinas,

the doubting and the tardy,
the not yet fully believing and the perpetually late,

bringing us into relationship with him.

This relationship enables and empowers us to be in relationship with each other:

those who have been here for a long time,
and those who have just recently arrived;
those who know our story inside out,
and those who are just starting to learn it.

People of the risen Lord Jesus, let us be more truly in fellowship with Christ and with each other. Let us make room for all those whom he brings into the fellowship, and never call them or treat them as "tardy."