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Trinity Church Boston
John 20:19-31

A Tale of Two Thomases

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Hello, Trinity Church! What an absolute joy it is to be worshipping here with you today – I am so thrilled to be back. I want to extend an especially warm welcome to all of the Marathon runners and volunteers who are here this morning/evening. You all will have our prayers tomorrow for cool weather, plentiful carbohydrates, and that God’s love and mercy will be especially palpable for you as you ascend Heartbreak Hill tomorrow. Good luck.

This morning, I’d like to tell you a tale of two Thomases. The first Thomas, of course, is the one made famous, or perhaps infamous, by his starring role in the passage that we heard from the Gospel of John a moment ago. The text says that he was known as Thomas the Twin, but

unfortunately for him, he's much better known to us as "Doubting Thomas."

At the opening of this passage, Thomas is nowhere to be found. We aren't sure where he is, but all the other disciples are hiding out in a home together, still reeling from the events of the previous week: Jesus' last meal with them, his arrest and trial, and his brutal crucifixion, death, and burial.

In the verses just prior to these, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb and finds it empty, only to have Jesus, resurrected from the dead, appear to her. She goes and tells the other disciples what has happened — "I have seen the Lord!" she says to them. But the disciples are confused and they are scared. They don't seem to believe what Mary Magdalene has to say, or at least they don't act like it. They keep the door locked, the text says, "for fear of the Jews," a painful reminder to us of what happens when uncertainty morphs into the scapegoating of an entire group of people.ⁱ

Suddenly, Jesus appears and speaks to the gathered disciples, breathes on them, shows them his wounds—and then leaves. And so

when Thomas comes back, they say to him the very same thing that Mary Magdalene had said to them: “we have seen the Lord!” Thomas voices what the others had not when it was Mary showing up, breathless, with news of what she had seen—who she had seen—at the tomb.

“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,” he says.

Which brings us to our second, slightly more unexpected, Thomas: Thomas Bayes. A theologian and mathematician, Thomas Bayes lived in England in the early 1700s. He is probably most well-known for the approach to probability that he developed and to which he lends his name: Bayesian statistics.ⁱⁱ Now my friends, I have learned a lot these past few years at grad school, but I assure you that mathematics is not part of the standard curriculum at seminary. So with the assurance that I am no expert and that there will not be a pop quiz, explore with me for a moment what Bayesian statistics is, and what on earth it might have to do with the Gospel.

Put very simply, probability is a measure of how often something will happen. In classical statistics, it's calculated by finding how frequently a certain outcome will occur over many random trials. For example: flip a coin a bunch of times and half the time it will come up heads, half the time it will come up tails. But Bayesian statistics works a little bit differently. Bayesian statistics gives us additional tools so that we can update our beliefs about the probability of a certain event based on what has happened in the past. In other words, "Bayesian inference interprets probability as a measure of *believability* or *confidence* that an *individual* may possess about the occurrence of a particular event."ⁱⁱⁱ

Believability. Confidence. These are words that not only mean something to statisticians, but to us as people of faith. And here we start to see how Thomas Bayes' dual vocations of theologian and mathematician might have informed one another. Because Bayesian statistics, like our Christian faith, relies on a key concept, a core belief: that we have the capacity for change, and that that change matters. And my friends, the question I want to ask you this morning is: do you

actually believe that? Do you believe that you, that we, are capable of change?

Thomas the disciple, despite his “doubting” moniker, I think is actually just being a good Bayesian statistician. All of the other disciples had the benefit of having already seen Jesus a week prior. They have more data, and so they’ve updated their beliefs. But Thomas doesn’t have that data yet. It still seems pretty darn unlikely to him that Jesus, his friend and teacher, has risen from the dead and is now walking and talking among them once again.

Jesus is always seeking to be nearer to us, and so he gives Thomas what he needs to believe that this ultimate change is real, that he was dead and now he is alive. He appears to Thomas, doubts and all, and invites him to touch his wounded flesh, reach INSIDE of his body—whatever it takes, because Jesus wasn’t resurrected for the sport of it, he was resurrected to show us, by any means necessary, that nothing is impossible with God. Nothing, not even death, will conquer love.

The resurrection compels us to update our Bayesian inferences and believe in a new way that we can change, that other people can change,

and that the institutions and communities we belong to can change. Not that they always SHOULD change, and not as a precursor or condition for salvation or love, but that they CAN, that they have the capacity to transform into something new, something different. People of God, do you actually believe that you can change?

Because Christ is risen, we are not doomed to remain stuck in our old ways of hurting ourselves and each other. We are not doomed to be marked forever by the worst thing that we have done. We are not doomed to watch our friends and neighbors languish in the systems of death and destruction that we once built up around ourselves like walls. We can change, and THIS is the Good News.

And we testify to each other that it is true every time we embrace the transformation that God beckons us into. I am different than I was the last time that I stood here in this church with you, and so are you. Marathoners, your bodies and minds are different than they were when you began training, and you will be changed once again tomorrow, no matter the outcome of the race. We are changed by the waters of baptism—not because we were wretched beforehand, but because in the

water we allow our whole selves to be embraced by God and by our community. To celebrate these transformations, to believe them, is what it means to have faith in the resurrected Christ.

There is real joy in this, make no mistake. And, with that joy comes responsibility, because we have to start contending with what this belief will mean for us. If we believe that we can change, who would you have to start talking to again after having written them off long ago? If we believe that we can change, why do we treat prisoners in this country as though they are evil and always will be, locking each other in solitary confinement for days, weeks, sometimes years on end?^{iv} If we believe that we can change, how can we defend a cynical outlook that would rather us throw up our hands and say “things are bad and they always will be” instead of “things are bad and so therefore we must change them?” There is such joy in knowing that we can change, and there is a real cost to it. The cost is not suffering or punishment or death – Jesus took care of those last week. The cost to us is hope.

Thomas the disciple makes Thomas Bayes proud when he finally exclaims, “My Lord and my God.” But Jesus’ admonition that follows is so important to this story: “Have you believed because you have seen me?” he asks. I really do not believe that Jesus has any interest in shaming people, but I do think he has an interest in telling the truth. And in this case, he reminds Thomas, AND all of the other disciples, that NONE of them believed that he was risen when it was Mary Magdalene delivering that news to them. None of them thought that Jesus could have possibly appeared to her, a woman, before he appeared to them. Jesus does not let them off the hook for this, even though he knows that they are afraid and that the world outside their doors is chaotic and uncertain. I know you are scared, he says. I know this is a brand new reality. But that is all the more reason why you must learn to trust each other, and to trust each other’s capacity for change. And I believe that you can learn to do it. I believe that you can be transformed. May we have the bravery, the strength, and the humility to truly believe in the resurrected Christ this Easter. Amen.

ⁱ For more information and resources about anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism in the New Testament, please see <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0153.xml>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.britannica.com/science/Bayesian-analysis>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.quantstart.com/articles/Bayesian-Statistics-A-Beginners-Guide/>. “In particular Bayesian inference interprets *probability* as a measure of *believability* or *confidence* that an *individual* may possess about the occurrence of a particular event. We may have a *prior* belief about an event, but our beliefs are likely to change when new evidence is brought to light. Bayesian statistics gives us a solid mathematical means of incorporating our prior beliefs, and evidence, to produce new *posterior* beliefs. Bayesian statistics provides us with mathematical tools to rationally update our subjective beliefs in light of new data or evidence. This is in contrast to another form of *statistical inference*, known as *classical* or *frequentist* statistics, which assumes that probabilities are the *frequency* of particular random events occurring in a *long run of repeated trials*.”

^{iv} <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/what-does-solitary-confinement-do-to-your-mind/>