

Twinnny McTwintwin

April 19th, 2020

Texts: Vincent Van Gogh; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20: 19-31

When Noah and Emily were younger, people would ask us all the time, “Are they twins?” And we would say, “Yes, this is Noah, and this is Emily.” And then the next question would very often be, “Are they identical?”

Now, it’s not that people are stupid. If they thought about it for a moment before asking the question, they would realize that a boy and a girl, no matter how much they look alike, cannot be *identical* twins.

One’s a boy, and the other’s a girl, after all, and there’s nothing identical about that!

Nonetheless, there’s just something about the idea of twins that makes you think identical no matter what other information you have about them.

Twins just seems to imply sameness, and brings up the question about how you can tell them apart.

I’m sure this was an issue for the hero of our story today, Thomas. Thomas was a twin. In fact, his nickname, Didymus, means twin in Greek, as our text told us today. But it is actually worse than that for him. His name, Thomas, actually means twin in Aramaic!

This immediately made me think of the controversy they had over in Britain a couple of years ago, about the name for a new 287 million dollar polar research vessel.

Perhaps foolishly, the government turned over the naming of the new ship to the public via the internet, and the clear winner was the name Boaty McBoatface!

Boaty McBoatface! You can’t say the British don’t have a sense of humor! And the controversy was, do they have to name the thing that after the public has had their say, or can the government just ignore the wishes of the people and name it something dignified.

In the end, they decided against Boaty McBoatface and called it the RRS Sir David Attenborough for the British Naturalist. However, they did name one of the Attenborough’s underwater research subs Boaty McBoatface!

But anyway, that’s what I thought of when I found this out about Thomas also known as Didymus!

It turns out he’s a guy with a name like Twinnny McTwintwin! It’s ridiculous! We probably don’t even know the guy’s real name, unless, horror of horrors, his parents really did name him Twinnny, or Thomas!

So it’s probably no coincidence that he’s the guy with the questions about who exactly it was that the disciples think they saw when they told him they had seen the Lord.

Questions of identity were right in his wheelhouse. He’d been dealing with them his whole life, always being mistaken for someone else, like his brother.

Being mistaken for someone else was his identity: are you the twin, or the other guy who looks just like him?

Now you might think that this question of identity is a bit ridiculous itself when it comes to Jesus. How could they not know it was Jesus!

But actually, it's not so ridiculous after all. Remember in the garden by the tomb, when Mary Magdalene saw the resurrected Jesus? What happened? She didn't recognize him at first! She thought he was the gardener! It was only after she had heard him call her by name that she recognized him, calling out "Rabbouni," which means "My Teacher!"

Or remember the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It's one of our readings for next week, but I'm pretty sure you've heard the story before. They walked and talked with the risen Jesus for an hour without recognizing him. It was only in the breaking of the bread that they finally realized who it was, and then Jesus disappeared from their sight.

In fact, the very next story in the Gospel of John following our episode today is also a question of identity, and Thomas is involved in it, too. The disciples are out fishing in the Sea of Galilee all night and haven't caught anything for hours, and early in the morning, Jesus stands on the shore and calls out to them, "Friends, do you have any fish?" And they don't recognize him.

It's only after he tells them to put their nets down on the right side of the boat, and the nets immediately start to fill with fish, that they recognize him.

Even then, the text says strangely, "None of the disciples dared ask him, 'Who are you?' They knew it was the Lord." It's only a minute later, after he took bread and gave it to them, and then took some of the fish and did the same, that they were sure that this was Jesus, the very same Jesus who had fed the four thousand with a few loaves and fishes.

So there's something a little different about the resurrected Jesus from the Jesus they knew. It takes a while to be sure that it is him.

I find this remarkable for two reasons: first, it's a stunning admission that the disciples didn't recognize Jesus at first. That hardly plays into the narrative that Jesus is alive again for sure and without a doubt. It makes it easy for someone to say, "No, it probably wasn't Jesus after all. You were just confused."

For this to be in the Gospel story, it had to be true that it wasn't easy to recognize the resurrected Jesus at first. And the Gospel writers had to have an absolute commitment to telling the truth about this, even when it didn't strengthen their case.

But, secondly, as the stories play out, the gradual recognition means that their doubts had been overcome by something like proof: a voice, a special name, a miracle, an action that was unmistakably Jesus'.

The stories are the very opposite of that feeling you have when you are riding the bus and you think you see your dead grandmother in the crowd crossing the street. There your brain is imposing the image of your grandma onto someone else because it so desperately wants your grandma to be alive, but then, when you look again, you realize it isn't grandma after all.

Here, it's the very opposite: the disciples see someone and immediately think it *isn't* Jesus, but then, when they look again, it turns out that it is.

As our story begins today, ten of the disciples are in a home, with the doors locked, because they are scared. They're scared because of what had happened to Jesus, and they're scared because of what might happen to them.

Then suddenly Jesus came through the locked doors and stood among them. He says “Peace be with you!” which sounds very formal, but in Hebrew it’s just shalom lachem, which is the normal way of greeting a group of people: “Oh, hey, hi you guys!” But it does literally mean Peace be with you, and in the middle of their terror, probably they were glad to hear a word of peace.

After Jesus had said hello, he showed them his hands and his side. Somehow, when it’s not Thomas, we read right over that part. Jesus showed them, the other disciples, his hands and his side. That should sound familiar.

And it’s only then that the text tells us that the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. They recognized him by the holes in his hands and in his side.

This isn’t someone who looks like Jesus. This really is Jesus, the same Jesus who was nailed to the cross, the same Jesus who was stabbed by a Roman soldier in the side.

They didn’t need fingerprints to be sure about who this was; they had nail prints instead!

The same Jesus who had died on the cross was now standing before them, alive and showing his wounds. His identity had been confirmed, no matter how confusing it was to see a dead person alive again, no matter how hard it was to recognize him sometimes in his resurrected and glorified body.

Ten of them were there, the ones who had been too frightened to go out, who were in hiding from the Jewish leaders. The eleventh remaining disciple was not. That eleventh disciple was Thomas.

We might call him Thomas the Brave, since he was the only one who dared venture out on that Easter Sunday evening. Maybe they had grocery shopping to do, and Thomas picked the short straw. We don’t know; for whatever reason, Thomas isn’t there. When he comes back, everyone tells him, “We have seen the Lord!”

And Thomas isn’t so sure. How do you know it was Jesus? Could you identify him? Is it really the Jesus we knew and loved? How can you be so certain?

When they tell him they saw the holes in his hands and in his side, it seems too much to believe. Thomas wants to believe, but he declares that he wants the identity confirmed himself. He knows how easy it is for one person to be mistaken for another. As a twin, he knows this beyond a shadow of a doubt, from personal experience.

He won’t believe Jesus is alive and with his disciples unless he sees things for himself.

Well, it takes a week. It must have been a tension filled week as Thomas talked about what the others had seen and he had not. They probably tried to talk him into believing, and he wanted to be sure.

He probably felt that it wasn’t fair, either. Twins have a pretty good sense of when they are being treated fairly, treated in the same way as the other twin, and when they are getting ripped off, not getting the same treatment.

Thomas must have felt that it wasn’t fair that the other ten disciples got to see Jesus and he hadn’t. I know I’d feel that way!

But a week later, Jesus appears again, and this time Thomas is present. The doors are locked again. They are still living in fear.

Jesus comes and says the exact same greeting to them once more: Peace be with you! *Shalom lachem!* Everyone, including Thomas, must have been excited: is it going to be an exact repeat of the week before?

Locked doors? Check. Jesus appearing? Check. Peace be with you? Check. So far, so good. Then come the hands and the side. This time Jesus isn't showing them to everyone, but specifically and especially to Thomas.

And more than just showing, he's telling Thomas to touch! He's going further: Put your finger here; see my hands! Reach out your hand and put it into my side!"

Thomas isn't just going to get to see; he's going to get to feel, too! But more even than that, Jesus says to Thomas, "Stop doubting and believe."

How did Jesus know that? How did Jesus know that Thomas was filled with doubt? Thomas' doubt had come after Jesus had disappeared! Thomas' doubt had come when Jesus was no longer present, or so they had all thought.

But that wasn't true! Jesus may have disappeared from their sight, but it didn't mean that he had left them! He had heard their every word! Jesus knew what Thomas had said that night after he got back to join the others. Jesus knew Thomas' conditions for belief, and now he was meeting them.

Jesus had heard. Jesus had still been present with his disciples, even though they couldn't see him! Jesus was doing the things that God does.

Thomas finally sees Jesus for who he really is. The question of identity has been answered, but in an astonishing way. Thomas doesn't just say, "It really is you, Jesus!"

What he says, when he had finally figured out who Jesus is, is something far beyond simple faith in the man Jesus. What Thomas says is, "My Lord and my God!"

He doesn't just believe that Jesus *the man* has been resurrected. Now he knows that Jesus the man has been God with us, the Lord of heaven in human flesh.

Thomas' faith now goes beyond that of the other disciples. Now, at last, he knows. He knows who Jesus is. There is no more confusion of identity, not anymore. The risen Jesus is the Lord, the one who is present even when he is unseen, the one who lived and died for us, and who lives again forever more.

It's hard to recognize the risen Jesus, very hard. It usually takes some sign from the Lord to do it, whether it is saying your name, as he did for Mary, or showing his hands and his side, as he did for the disciples, or even telling you what you said when you thought he wasn't there, as he did for Thomas.

And sometimes, as for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and for the disciples on the beach with their nets full of fish, the recognition that you are in the presence of the risen Lord comes in the breaking of the bread.

May the resurrected and living Lord Jesus make his presence known to us when he calls us by name, or when he works in our lives to fulfill our needs, or when he appears in the breaking of the bread at our communion in a few minutes.

Twinnny McTwintwin doubts for us all whenever we struggle in faith. And Twinnny McTwintwin speaks for us all, when the Risen Lord makes himself known to us: My Lord and my God.

May the risen Jesus make himself known to you in whatever way you need.

Amen