

A Tale of Two Churches

Hespeler, 24 April 2022 © Scott McAndless

Acts 5:27-32, Psalm 118:14-29, Revelation 1:4-8, [John 20:19-31](#)

This morning I would like to tell you about two gospels that we know were very popular and widely read in the early church. One of them you are very familiar with. It is a gospel attributed to someone who is only identified as the beloved disciple of Jesus, but tradition decided a long time ago that that disciple was named John. That does not necessarily mean that the book was literally written by that disciple, but it probably means that it was produced in a church that traced its stories and traditions about Jesus to a particular apostle, possibly John.

The Gospel of John, as it is known, is rather unique among the gospels in the Bible. Jesus is presented somewhat differently than in Matthew, Mark or Luke. He doesn't tell parables, for example, but instead gives these long discourses in which he explains many things to his disciples. In particular, the Gospel of John makes it clear that Jesus came to present a number of signs – seven are highlighted – that would convince everyone that he was the Messiah.

A Missing Gospel Found

But there is another gospel that you are maybe less familiar with that was also very popular in the early church. This gospel doesn't quite say who wrote it either, but it does say that the traditions in it also come from one of the disciples – specifically the one called Judas Thomas the Twin. And so, it is called the Gospel of Thomas.

We knew for centuries about this gospel. It is mentioned by a number of very early historical sources who even sometimes quote a few lines from it. But for hundreds of years, we could not read it. It did not make it into the New Testament. At some point it seems as if all of the copies of it were rounded up and destroyed. It was sad, but there was nothing that anyone could do about it.

That is until 1898 when a huge trove of papyrus fragments was found in an ancient garbage heap in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. Three of those fragments contained text from the ancient Greek Gospel of Thomas. But we didn't actually know what had been found until 1945 when an entire library of books was discovered at a place called Nag Hammadi in Egypt. One of those books was a translation into Coptic of the Gospel of Thomas. So, amazingly, we can now read this ancient lost gospel that was so well known and loved in the early church.

The Gospel of Thomas

The Gospel of Thomas is very different from any other Biblical gospel. It is more a collection of sayings than it is a narrative of Jesus' life. It shows no particular interest in Jesus' death or resurrection, but rather focuses on his teaching and especially on super secret teachings that it claims to have preserved. Let me read you a short passage to give you an idea of what it is like:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like."

Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a righteous messenger."

Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher."

Thomas said to him, "Master, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like."

Jesus said, "I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended."



And he took him, and withdrew, and spoke three sayings to him.

When Thomas came back to his companions, they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?"

Thomas said to them, "If I tell you even one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me. Then fire will come forth from the rocks and devour you."

Two Distinct Communities

There was probably an early Christian community for whom the Gospel of John was their most important document. It contained their best recollection of the person of Jesus and what he had done. These were traditions and teachings that they had carefully cultivated and passed on until it eventually got written down.

But there was also an early Christian community for whom the Gospel of Thomas was that kind of document. These communities seem to have been able to live alongside each other because the gospels they used seem to have been aware of each other. Sure, they didn't agree about everything, but they respected and honoured the teaching and the portrayal of Jesus that each one had preserved. That does not mean, however, that there was not some rivalry between them.

Imagine it this way. There are two churches in a town. On this side of town, the Church of St. John and on the other the Church of St. Thomas. The churches get along fine with each other. They have a long-standing basketball rivalry between their men's teams. They also often cooperate in doing good works for the people of the city because they both want to live as their master did. But they still cannot stop from noticing how differently they approach the Christian life.

A Celebration of the Resurrection

The people of the Church of St. John are gathered. They are celebrating the day that is, for them, the most important day of the year. They call it the Pascha; we would call it Easter of course. It is the annual celebration of the day when their Lord Jesus rose from the dead. People of the church have been anticipating this day for a long time. They have prepared themselves by fasting and praying. But now that the day has arrived, they gather with great rejoicing and the place where they meet is decorated with banners and flowers. They greet one another with the good news. "He is risen!" one calls out only to be answered with, "He is risen indeed!"

After a while, they settle down and join in a shared feast. Then they sit and listen while some of the elders share the stories of Jesus that have been handed down to them, traditions that they believe go back to the most beloved disciple of Jesus. One of the elders begins a favourite story.

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

"On the day when our Lord rose from the dead, that very evening, the disciples were gathered even as we are gathered on this same day. They, like us, knew that they had many enemies in that city, and so the doors of the house were shut and locked. And yet, despite that, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord."

She pauses then and waits while the gathered church emulates the disciples with their own shouts of joy and sighs of contentment. But, even as she does so, she notices one young boy sitting nearby who seems a little bit troubled. And so, once everyone has settled down, she turns to him to ask what it is that he is concerned about.

What about the Other Church?

"Oh, nothing, I was just wondering," he says. "As I came to our Pascha celebration today, I passed by

the Church of St. Thomas on the other side of town. And I noticed that it wasn't decorated for the festival, and they didn't even seem to be gathering today. Why is it that they don't celebrate the resurrection like we do? Do they not believe that Jesus rose from the dead?"

"Well," the elder replies, "of course they believe in the resurrection. That is the basis of all our faith as followers of Christ. But they do think about these things differently from how we do."

Johannine Traditions about Thomas

She pauses and thinks for a moment. She remembers that the stories of Jesus that have been passed down in her church say a few things about the disciple Thomas – things that she is convinced illustrate the character of the people in the church of St. Thomas. She knows that, when Jesus had first suggested that the group should go down to the Jerusalem near the end despite the clear danger to him, it had been Thomas who had said to the others, "**Let us also go, that we may die with him.**" (John 11:16) And, indeed, the Thomasites have proven themselves to be extraordinarily brave in the way they live out their faith in the city. The people in the Church of St. John cannot help but admire that.

They also tell the story of the time when Jesus said to the disciples, "**And you know the way to the place where I am going.**" And Thomas had had been the one who piped up immediately to say, "**Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?**" (John 14:4-5) They know that that has always been something that obsesses the people of his church. They always want to be in the know about everything and nothing disturbs them more than the thought that there might be some secret piece of knowledge out there that they don't have. Indeed, all the leaders of Thomas' Church pride themselves on the secret knowledge that they have accumulated.

A Different Focus

The people of this church don't see things that way. They think it is enough to be aware of all the things that Jesus did openly to show the whole world who he was. They celebrate how Jesus healed the blind man to show the whole world that he was the light of the world, how he gave the bread to the people because he was the bread of life.

The people of John's Church have always known these things about the believers on the other side of town. They don't pretend to understand them completely, but they still value them as sisters and brothers who share in a common cause. But this issue does trouble the elder somewhat. The belief that Jesus rose from the dead is so central to everything at the church of John that it is really hard to imagine anyone seeing it any other way. How can she explain how little attention the other church pays to that?

A New Tradition?

But at that point the elder remembers something – a tradition that must have been passed down or that may have come to her in a dream one day. She immediately picks up the story. "On the day when our Lord was raised from the dead and when he first appeared to all of the disciples, there was one who was not present. Thomas was not there."

This declaration certainly causes a stir among the people of the congregation. How could one of the twelve not have been present, especially on that day of all days? Even on this day, this anniversary so many years later, there is not one of them who could imagine being anywhere else than with their fellow believers.

That Thomas should not have been there seems to imply that he put little importance on the truth that Jesus had been raised from the dead. And yet, as they think about it, it does seem to make sense. Did not those who revered the Gospel of Thomas betray much the same attitude. Is that not why they have

not bothered to even meet on this day?

Thomas is Convinced

But the elder has not finished her story. She goes on to relate Thomas' foolishness – how he refused to believe even when the others had shared with him their experience of the resurrected Christ. **“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,”** he had said, **“I will not believe.”** It was his way of saying that whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead didn't matter to him. Instead, he only sought after the secret knowledge that Jesus could offer him.

“But even Thomas learned better in the end,” she concludes. “For Jesus did return the next week, and when Thomas was confronted with the reality that the risen Christ stood in front of him, all of his secret knowledge was not enough to prevent him from falling upon his knees and crying out, **“My Lord and my God,”** as he realized that he stood before the risen one.”

Many Different Understandings

We are often given the impression upon reading the New Testament that early Christianity was unanimous in its understanding of who Jesus was and what his resurrection had accomplished. This was simply not the case. We have uncovered a great deal of evidence that there was a great diversity of belief among early Christians. Many early Christians did put a great deal of emphasis upon the resurrection. But there seems to have been others, like the communities that greatly valued the Gospel of Thomas, who were less interested in the resurrection and much more interested in amassing special secret knowledge.

It is kind of interesting to wonder how the differences between these churches and the discussions that took place amongst them may have influenced the ways that people remembered the stories of Jesus and how they eventually came to write them down.

John's Criticism of Thomas

I've often thought that poor Thomas got a bit of a bad rap in Christian tradition. The only thing that people know about him, apparently, is that he doubted the resurrection. But I suspect that that story has less to do with anything that the historical Thomas did than it has to do with the attitude held towards those who revered the Gospel of Thomas by the people who revered the Gospel of John.

Yes, they probably were puzzled and maybe even disturbed by the failure of the Thomasites to understand the importance of the resurrection as they did. But really, in the history of the church, such differences in emphasis are hardly unique. Presbyterians and Baptists, Roman Catholics and Anglicans, Lutherans and Pentecostals, we are all in our different churches because we have different perspectives on various aspects of the Christian faith and we have clashed over these things both in the past and in the present.

But I would like us to know one thing. The people who preserved the Gospel of John did struggle, I think it is plain, with the people in that other church and how they approached the Christian life. But, even as they criticized Thomas and those whom Thomas represents in the gospel, as doubters who did not bother to be around on the day of resurrection, they still knew that they had a shared mission and that they had one Lord. They understood that Thomas did fall to his knees before his risen Lord just as they did, that he did cry out, **“My lord and my God,”** together with them. And that was enough.

I hope that that is something that we can keep in mind as we do our best to live out our Christian faith alongside other believers who have different priorities and understandings but still have the same risen Lord.