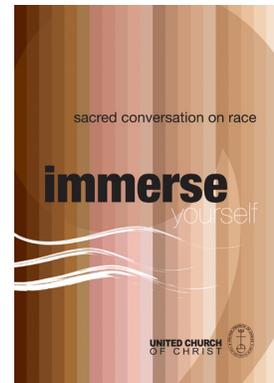


## Easter Season “Sermon Seeds” for a Sacred Conversation on Race

Based on Gospel for  
**Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2009: John 20: 19-31**

by Phil Campbell  
Director of Ministry Studies,  
Director of the Justice and Peace Program, and  
Visiting Assistant Professor of Leadership and Congregational Studies  
Iliff School of Theology



*Thomas as advocate for honestly facing the past  
and its implications for conversation on race*

The Apostle Thomas is one of the more famous bit part characters in the Bible. Only in the gospel of John does he play a role and even here it is not much. He has, all told, three speaking parts, the best known of which is detailed in the gospel lection for the second of Easter. It is this reading that has bestowed on him the moniker that stuck: “Doubting Thomas.” Today is his day; Thomas is the disciple from Missouri: “Show me; then I will believe.” For understandable reasons Thomas is the negative example in many a sermon on the importance of living with faith instead of demanding proof. One expression of this is found in the words of “These Things Did Thomas Count,” (254, *New Century Hymnal*): “The vision of his skeptic mind was keen enough to make him blind to any unexpected act too large for his small world of fact. His reasoned certainties denied that one could live when one had died...” There is merit in this line of interpretation. The juxtaposition of faith and fact is a prominent theme in Christian theology; it reminds that, by and large, people do not come to lasting faith via proof, be the evidence natural or supernatural.

But there might be more to Thomas than his lack of faith. Verse 25 records Thomas saying, “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.” In so doing all Thomas was asking for is *what the other disciples had already received*. Thomas was not present when Jesus first appeared among them and “showed them his hands and his side.” (v. 20) Given this, Thomas’ request does not seem unreasonable.

Perhaps, however, the request to verify the wounds goes deeper than either faithlessness or the desire to see what everyone else already had. In John 11, amid the story of the raising of Lazarus, the other disciples did not want Jesus to go to Bethany to tend to his friend because their journey would take them close to Jerusalem and they feared for Jesus’ safety and their own. But Thomas reacted differently, saying “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Might Thomas be revealing that he knew something about discipleship – that it is not an easy ride, but a demanding way to live that requires commitment and sacrifice if it is to be authentic and significant? Thomas’ understanding was, sadly, borne out by the time of today’s reading. Jesus had died for the cause; Jesus had suffered the horror of the crucifixion. Thomas knew that crucifixion was a price that had to be paid in order to stand up to the empire of death and destruction and to witness to a new way of being – a way of peace, love, inclusion, justice, not just for the rich and powerful but for everyone. Perhaps Thomas was like the centurion at the foot of the cross in Mark’s gospel knew that *it is the crucifixion* that reveals Jesus as the one sent from God. Thus Thomas, coming in on the middle of resurrection talk, asks to see the wounds because he wanted to know, “Who is this Resurrected One and what relationship does he have to the One we followed to the cross?” Some, once the resurrection happens, want to forget about crucifixion and steer clear of talk about uncomfortable things. They think resurrection calls us to forget the painful past and focus on how much better things are now. Thomas’s insistence on connecting resurrection with crucifixion can serve to acknowledge that

suffering was real and it still is. Resurrection doesn't mean that Jesus' death was imaginary; the only way to resurrection is *through* crucifixion, not around it.

Resurrection should not encourage us to deny problems that still exist; rather, it means there is hope for addressing them. Might Thomas be the faithful skeptic that keeps us honest and pushes us to remember that the resurrected Christ cannot be separated from the crucified Jesus? This is an important dimension of the message particularly for those the U. S. where the dominant culture is history-phobic. Too often, the official version of the past glosses over the more troublesome chapters and advocates "getting over it." Racism, decimation of indigenous cultures, oppression of women, lack of civil rights for the glbt community? Things are not as bad as they once were, right? Is this what resurrection means – forgetting about the painful past? The witness of Thomas rejects this notion: "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."

Through this lens consider the words of then presidential candidate Barack Obama from his March 2008 landmark speech on race:

...race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now...

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through - a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now...we will never be able to come together... Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point...we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow... inferior education... legalized discrimination... Blacks prevented from owning property... meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white...

Obama went on to say that whites also have grievances that must be recognized, but he added something else that I believe whites need to hear. He said, "In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination - and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past - are real and must be addressed."

This call to face our uncomfortable history of race, this call that needs to be heeded especially in white communities and congregations, is often avoided – avoided because it is unpleasant, just as Thomas' insistence in seeing the wounds of crucifixion was unpleasant; we are asked to deal with things we might rather sidestep. But as the late Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun said, "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way."

Thomas the Apostle: faithless doubter or honest disciple who refuses to let us forget the past, even the painful parts? This second Sunday of Easter is a day of resurrection, but it is also a day when the marks of crucifixion remain. From the ashes of despair, new flames of hope and joy will rise and justice and love can burst forth, but such a future awaits only those who deal honestly with the past and learn from it.

