

What's in a name?
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Second Sunday of Easter, 24/4/22

I am having an identity crisis. According to last Sunday's service booklet I was apparently Father Harold, and this week it says I am Mrs Susan Peatfield. Just in case anyone is wondering, I have it on good authority that this is the real Margaret Joachim. If that's not clear, maybe you should've gone to Specsavers.

But it did get me thinking about names: who gets identified in the gospels and who doesn't, and what that might tell us. Whichever version of the Easter story you read, it is clear that the risen Jesus does not appear to his disciples until he has been seen by others. Those 'others' were not the people that might have been expected. In fact, in a first-century cultural context they were so completely unexpected that when the gospels were being written forty to seventy years after Jesus's death, great care was taken to record their names and identities. This was almost certainly because they were part of the fledgling Christian community and had a continuing role in spreading the gospel.

This makes sense. If you are writing an account of some past event, you are most likely to mention the names of people your readers will recognise, and it gives the story much more credibility. Those people were involved, they were witnesses and participants, they can, if still alive, back up what you are saying. So, for example, the woman who accused Peter of being one of Jesus's followers is not named; nor are the two thieves, the centurion who acknowledged Jesus as the son of God, or the soldier who pierced his side with a spear. They were not part of the little Christian group; even if anyone had known their names it was not important information.

A small digression here. There is something called the 'New Testament Apocrypha', which consists of a number of books and letters written later than the gospels and which were not included in the New Testament because they were not thought to be authentic. In general they are much-embroidered works of more-or-less fiction based on fragments of gospel episodes. Some of these do assign names to other characters. For example, the so-called Gospel of Nicodemus names the two thieves and the soldier with the spear. But that wasn't written until the fourth century, and other apocryphal writings give the same people different names. The names we have in the New Testament are authoritative and consistent, and if one changes – Simon to Peter, for example, or Saul to Paul – it is recorded to avoid any confusion.

So who are the people who are carefully named? The man dragged out of the crowd to carry Jesus's cross is identified as Simon of Cyrene. Even if he wasn't a Christian to begin with he seems to have become one, and his sons were definitely part of the community. The first witnesses of the resurrection are also named: Mary Magdalen, Mary the mother of James and Joses, Salome, wife of Zebedee, Joanna, Susanna and Cleopas. All of them, except for Cleopas, are women. If we consider the many other women who encountered Jesus during his ministry but are not named: the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Samaritan woman at the well, the widow of Nain, the woman with the haemorrhage, the adulterous woman, Jairus's daughter, and so on, it shows just how important those five women were. They had had the first-hand experience; they were the ones who realised what had happened; they were the witnesses who could authenticate the empty tomb.

Thomas is the one disciple named in today's gospel reading. He, of course, was initially in the same situation as the other ten. None of them understood what had happened. The women told them, but, as Luke puts it, 'it seemed to them an idle tale'. It wasn't until Jesus actually appeared in the room where they were hiding that realisation dawned. He was dead and is alive. The disciples believed – but not

until they had direct evidence. Mary Magdalen had also seen and spoken with Jesus. The other women had believed because of an absence and an angelic message, but the men needed proof.

But only ten of the disciples were in that room. Thomas wasn't there. We don't know why, and we don't know whether or not he had heard the women's story earlier in the day. We do know that the first attempt the other disciples made to preach the gospel of the risen Christ was an abject failure – and they were talking to one of their closest companions. They would certainly need the effusion of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost before they became effective evangelists.

Thomas gets a very bad press. He wasn't the only one who needed evidence before he could believe. We don't hear about doubting Peter or doubting John, although they had seen the empty tomb. In fact there is something very special about Thomas which sets him apart from the others. When he does see Jesus, his words indicate that he is the very first among all his followers to understand the real significance of the preceding years. John's gospel opens: 'In the beginning was the Word – the Word was with God and the Word was God...He was in the world and the world did not know him...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' As John unfolds his story of Jesus's life on earth, various people acknowledge him as 'son of God', others call him 'Messiah', Peter affirms that he is 'the holy one of God'. But not until now, when the risen Christ appears to Thomas, is the ultimate connection made. Thomas says: 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus is God, familiar and reassuring and at the same time quite other, mysterious, tremendous, awesome in the proper sense of the word.

The disciples have been with Jesus for three years, but only now does one of them realise who he really is. Only now do the teachings, healings, explanations of scripture and sequence of events make sense. Only now do they begin to realise that they have a gospel to proclaim, not just a series of stories to recount. So it is particularly unfortunate that the one thing everyone knows about Thomas is that name: 'Doubting Thomas'. He should be celebrated as the one to whom it all first and most gloriously all made sense.