



# First United Church of Oak Park

## The Worst Nickname

John 14:1-6

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Thomas has got to have the most unfortunate nickname of all the apostles. So many others have great nicknames, There's Simon who is called "The Rock." There's Mary Magdalene called the Apostle to the Apostles. There's John and James who are called the Sons of Thunder—that's awesome. Then there's Thomas, called Doubting Thomas. Not a great nickname. But Thomas is really helpful, because he always speaks his mind, and when Jesus replies to Thomas, it's really helpful. This Doubt of Thomas', it usually shows up with him just asking pertinent follow-up questions.

Today's passage is an excellent example of Thomas really in his element. Jesus has been teaching for some time, talking about challenging things. What the future holds for him, what will transpire for the disciples themselves, and a mysterious allusion to some place where Jesus is going, and the way to get there. Jesus speaks of this as being a house, but the house is filled with many mansions. And that Jesus will first depart and then return to bring the Disciples as well. This immediately calls to mind the great visions of the prophets, the ecstatic visitations of prophets journeying into heaven to see things that beggar human imagination. These visions in the Jewish tradition are called the Kaheklot—or mansions—tradition. Think of Isaiah who stands in the court of the seraphim with their six wings and lidless eyes singing Holy, Holy, Holy. Think of Ezekiel who sees the very throne of God with its four-face cherubim and wheels within wheels.

What Jesus is saying here, that he is going to go somewhere, and that somewhere will have a house and inside that house is many mansions, it calls to mind these otherworldly visitations. It looks for all the world like Jesus is talking about his own unique ability to see into secret places of heaven, and then Jesus seems ready to move on to other topics, concluding by saying that the Disciples already know the way to get to this place.

But Thomas, God bless him, Thomas speaks his mind. He says "Jesus, I don't really know what you're talking about. I don't know what this place you're going to is, this house filled with mansions, I don't know what that is, so how am I supposed to know the way to get there?"

God bless Thomas for speaking his mind. Thank God for Thomas and his pertinent follow-up questions. Because Jesus answers him, telling Thomas—you know the way to God's own dwelling place. I am the way. Jesus says you know the way because I am the way, and you know me. You know what I do, because you have been doing that alongside me this whole time. And with that the way to these

mansions of rest are plucked out of the airy stuff of dreams and visions, plucked out of the great beyond, are gently planted in the here and now, sunk on the foundations of the ordinary, placed not in the great hereafter but beneath Thomas' own feet at that very moment. All that the Disciples had been doing—gathering thousands over simple meals of bread and fish, calling the outcasts in to the center of beloved community, inviting people to give of their own presence and find they are blessed with the gift of kinship—the ministry they were doing with Jesus, this WAS the way.

And when Jesus departed from them, they still knew the way, could still walk the way, could still be the way for the world in the ordinary things of bread broken and community gathered and waters parted and poured to welcome new life. Jesus said, I am the Way, this is the path to God, straight through what we are doing right now. There's not some other, better way. There is just this, the good and holy ordinary life together of people of faith. That is the Way. Thank God for Thomas and his pertinent follow up questions!

I understand Thomas here very well. Because it is easy for me to feel as if there is some other, better, more fantastical life of faith out there. It's easy for me to feel like my life of faith should be like the great visions of the Bible—like Isaiah in the court of the seraphim, or Ezekiel with his vision of the throne of God, or Mary's Magnificat with her clear-eyed view of the Realm of God made flesh, part of her own flesh. It's easy to feel like a person with a real and meaningful faith would have fantastical visions, marvelous encounters with the living God, visitations to that house of many mansions. And for those prophets, for those visionaries who can be counted on one hand, bless them. Bless them, but that's not what my faith is like. My faith is like that of Thomas. The life of faith that I lead it is a blessing and sanctifying of the ordinary. Water, bread, wedding vows, funeral commendations, memory, partings, greetings, just an ordinary way. That is the way.

There's not some other, better way. There is just this, the good and holy ordinary life together of people of faith. That is the Way. When we bless and baptize Will, with three generations of family gathered and part of this community—we are treading on the very path to paradise. Remembering the words of life and touching the waters of grace, remembering that the very same blessing of God's grace that flowed so freely over Will's brow is upon you, God's love is for you, too. That is the way. When we memorialized and blessed home to God our sister in Christ Sylvia Menninga, singing and speaking good words and resting on the sturdiness of the faith, we tread on the very path to paradise. That is the way. When we bless the bread and cup of communion, following Christ's commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us, we are treading the path to paradise. Visiting each other in hospital, calling one another on the phone just to check in, celebrating joys, mourning losses, treating one another's lives as being as important as our own, and in so doing finding our lives are ennobled and expanded, that is the Way. Thank God for Thomas and his pertinent follow-up questions. There's not some other, better way. There is just this, the good and holy ordinary life together of people of faith.