

Sermon on John 20, 24

Opening Service at the r e t - twin-conference,
18 May 2016, Halle/ Saale

The Reading: Genesis 25, 19-28

These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham fathered Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger." When her days to give birth were completed, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

The Gospel: John 20, 24-29

Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Sermon on John 20, 24

1.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

once upon a time... 114 years ago in the beautiful month of May:

My great-grandmother was pregnant again and it was the day that the child should be born.

She had already born 10 children – and now: ... twins came into the world!

Alarmed, she looked at great-grandfather: *Please, don't tell anyone!*

One of these twins was my grandfather. Later on another 13th child was added to the family, and of the 8 sons, 6 became pastors ...

Why am I telling you such a personal story?

Well, even stories of the Bible begin with beloved relatives. It tells us about people who grow up together, who use nearness, neighbourhoods and networks. People of the Bible are not just isolated beings, who travel about alone and anonymous like heroes.

They are part of a huge community, some close by, the others far away, sometimes in conflict, sometimes cooperating together.

But all of them – all of us! – were born as children to mothers and fathers – and will ourselves become mothers and fathers of a new generation.

No renewal of the people of God, no *Reformation* without ancestors and descendants of whatever confession! No training without experience and curiosity, no *Education* without encounters between teachers and pupils. No change without growth and new beginnings, no *Transformation* without origins and future.

2.

Our service to open a *Twin-Consultation* needs *twin-stories*! The next is Genesis 25. From Abraham, who leaves his family and sets off, it continues to Isaac, who finds a new relative: Rebecca, an Aramaic woman. And his prayer helps her to become pregnant: at first *no* children – and then *two* children come at the same time. And the problem arises that from the beginning they are unidentical ones and cannot stand each other. In the battle of the brothers God recognises a separation of the peoples. Among brothers there are strengths and weaknesses. And it is commented on with apparent surprise *that the older one serves the younger one* (Gen 25,23).

The newly born twins are very different from each other – by the way that apparently happens in the best of families! There is nothing similar about them. They each go their own way. Esau is described as *rough and red* – the Hebrew word *ademoni* derives from *adam* (v.25) – and can probably be best translated as *earth colours*.

There is only one other person in the Bible who looks like Esau: the shepherd David, before he is crowned as King (1 Sam 16, 12)! And not a word is said about Jacob's looks!

Later their differences become clearer, tickle our fantasies:

the one a skilful hunter, the other a man of manners, here *street boy*, there *stay-at-home*.

All quite clear, I think: the one *father's best* – the other *mother's darling* (v.28)!

From the beginning their differences allowed them to drift apart. And yet they remain twins! Two from the same stock! With branches in exactly opposite directions! And yet they remain brothers, growing up together, dependent on each other! From the beginning on their way, taking steps of understanding, towards the goal of reconciliation.

Twins to identify ourselves with *one* or the *other one*.

And our *two* places are examples *too*, São Leopoldo and Halle.

The fact – that geographically they are further away from each other than Mamre and Mesopotamia (Gen 25, 9+20), in the book of Genesis – will hardly separate us in this globalised world of new networks, neighbourhoods and new nearness.

Nowadays we see the chances to learn from our different contexts – freed from the narrowness of our territories – to discover the *transformative* power of the *Reformation*! And to rediscover strength from the old surprise sprung on us by God, *that the older one will serve the younger one* (v.23). For in the School of the Reformers they help us to learn from older people with respect. And our already ageing generation learns to be responsible for a sustainable *service* for future younger generations.

3.1.

Our service to open a *Twin-Consultation* can only stand on *two* legs.

So let us go on to a second step with the Gospel.

Thomas is the one who is called *the twin* in the Gospels. More a marginal figure, but John speaks often about him. Thomas is not exactly the *Head-of-the-class* among the disciples, as Peter is. Thomas does not seem either to be zealous or forward or even diligent. So he often speaks in places at the margins, where we are no longer listening. If we give him space,

Thomas asks and gives his statements. What would our *twin* meeting be without this *twin*? Let us let him in!

3.2.

At first Thomas expresses himself in a way of *resignation*.

When Lazarus dies, Thomas is really depressed. When Jesus calls the friends nevertheless to go into the death house, Thomas already wants to give up: *Let us go with him so that we can die with him!* (John 11, 16). Added to the resignation of this disciple comes the reproach of the disciple Martha: *Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died* (v.21).

And then she receives the wonderful Easter message: For Jesus says to her: *I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, will live, even when he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me, he or she will never die. Do you believe that?* (vv.25-26).

I can well imagine how Thomas stood there in the background quietly thinking his own thoughts. And how often do we give up, put things off, let things be? Frustration gains the upper hand, danger of surrendering oneself to it. Yet against all thoughts of giving up, even the reproach to his face, the message of new life is knockin'. In Christ, in faith, life gets meaning in spite of death, and the question of what it all means: gains new life! This power stands against all rigidity and lack of perspective.

3.3.

Second time Thomas speaks out, he appears to be *clueless*.

When Jesus says goodbye, when treason and denial are making themselves felt among the disciples – and Jesus nevertheless and in spite of everything gives them courage: *Let not your heart be troubled! Believe in God and believe in me* (John 14,1) – then Thomas, just like Peter before him, simply does not know how to go on: *Lord, we do not know where you are going: how can we know the way?* (v.5).

As though Thomas had not heard the inviting assurance, in which Jesus opens the door for him and also for us, to extend the horizon of our thinking and acting: *In my Father's house are many mansions!* (14, 2). Thus Thomas, even if he himself feels hopeless at a loss, is here one of the first to be allowed to hear the call of Jesus: *I am the way and the truth and the life* (14, 6). That gives him and us orientation, perspective and transformation!

3.4.

Now let us look at Thomas in the Gospel heard today.

It is always his *doubts* that are so emphasized. But he also becomes a *witness* for the new awakening and the new life. Thomas was only not there at the decisive moment. It was as if someone had missed Easter so to speak, and had remained outside the community, when it was recognised, that *the Crucified One*, is truly also *the Risen One*.

It's just haunting, how the Bible describes the atmosphere: the community is full of fear (John 20,19). They meet together, but the first ones are already missing (v.24). One of the core group members says, *he will never believe.* (v.25). In the meantime they only meet together behind locked doors (v.26). But: the community does not give up, they continue to support each other. They come together again, *after eight days* – see ya next Sunday! – and to the doubts of the one, comes the witness of the others.

4.

Meanwhile: has it become clear to you why this Thomas is always called *the twin*, yet nowhere in the Bible is the other twin ever spoken of?

Lost? Perhaps it is much more simple. This nameless twin of Thomas leaves room – for us!

We walk beside Thomas. He is not just a distant relative.

Thomas – just like a twin – is us today even so similar that we could be mistaken for him. We see how in *his face our* questions, *our* doubts are reflected. We recognise ourselves, when we *give up again*, and *don't know how to go on*, when we at last want so much to *see*, what we want to *believe*.

Thomas by the way does not only want to *see* Jesus, he wants to *catch*, to *grasp* Him. And above all: that with the wounds of Jesus, that is what he wants to catch. For in this case that is what is so difficult to understand, that can take away all hopes: that this Godchild Jesus suffers, that he is taken prisoner, tortured, sentenced to death and executed. A helpless human being, whom they only wanted dead. That just this person has been raised from the dead and is God's son! It is exactly this suffering – human suffering that rules the world, which opposes God and Christ – that is what Thomas wants to understand and overcome.

Jesus comes into their circle, although everything is sealed, everything speaks against it, no-one gives a chance. *Peace be with you!* That is what he says. No, no casual greeting! *Peace* comes in sight! He brings the *Schalom*, life should become whole! That is what we pray for and work for in these days, for a world so much in conflict! For this world may peace and justice be renewed, reshaped and spread out!

It is remarkable that Thomas was invited a second time, that he returns and remains there with the others. Then Jesus meets Thomas with hand and foot and gives our twin brother this favour. Thomas is allowed in a very concrete way to see, to touch and to accept for himself that Jesus really is the Risen One, of whom he had heard so much.

People in São Leopoldo, Halle and everywhere in the world meet other people. They also give a face to the Gospel, the Good News of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they become hands and feet of one body.

Sisters and Brothers, It is you all, who make faith visible. You make it possible for others to touch trust. You give hope a face – what am I saying? – so many faces, as can be seen here today! A good reason to say thank you from my heart to those of you who have come again, and to those of you have come to join us now, for all kinds of assistance and participation. You give a profile to the prophecy and add visible contours to the invisible power! Each and every one of us is a twin of Thomas! Our sister, our brother, who could be mistaken for us, experiences again that he finds himself, that she finds herself in the midst of a community of Jesus friends.

Thomas confesses: *My Lord, My God* – his transformation to become an answering active subject – as he recognises a human being on the side of the suffering and those in despair. Our twin brother says: *My Lord and my God!*

Now he is able to say who this Jesus Christ is to him, and at the same time is able to confess what that means for us humans. *My Lord and my God.*

That is what comes about, when a person has grasped the wounds of Jesus!

Finally Jesus says the word, with which he goes beyond the single twin and speaks to a community. This word is said to to us as Thomas' twins of today. Let us allow Jesus words to give new courage, new perspective and hope for our second Twin-meeting *reformation – education – transformation: Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe!* (Joh 20,29)
Amen.