

Doubting Thomas?

The story of “Doubting Thomas” is so familiar that maybe you are groaning at the thought of hearing about it again. We all know the story: Thomas refuses to believe until he can touch and see. Thomas won’t take the word of the other apostles. Pig headed Thomas! Stubborn Thomas! Doubting Thomas!

John Calvin said this about Thomas: “The stupidity of Thomas was astounding and monstrous...he was not only obstinate, but also proud and contemptuous of his treatment of Christ.”

And then, Jesus appears, scolds Thomas, and Thomas moves from doubt to belief. That’s the story most of us grow up with.

And, we’ve got it all wrong.

The story we think we know is all about a skeptical, doubting Thomas who must see to believe. But the story St. John tries to get across to us is not that. It’s not about Thomas. It’s a story about Jesus. It is about the lengths to which Jesus will go to change our unbelief into belief.

Thomas set conditions. Jesus met them.

The point of this encounter is not about Thomas’ doubt; the point is what Jesus has done, is doing, and will continue to do, to bring us from unbelief to belief.

In fact, the literal translation (from the Greek) is not: “Do not doubt, but believe.” What Jesus actually said to Thomas was: “Do not be unbelieving, but believe!”

Poor Thomas gets the nickname “Doubting Thomas”, like he was somehow inferior to the others when it came to believing in the resurrection of Jesus. He wasn’t.

The other disciples told him: “We have seen the Lord!” And indeed they had. But as we heard in the gospel lesson, Jesus showed them his hands, showed them his side. And then, they believed!

Exactly what Thomas insisted on seeing, they saw. To claim Thomas was somehow weaker in faith than the others is just not the case.

Remember when Mary and the other women reported to all of them the scene at the empty tomb? The words of the angels? The encounter with Jesus? The reaction of all the apostles was this: “The story of the women seemed pure nonsense, and the apostles did not believe them.” Lk. 24:11.

Until Jesus came to them. Until Jesus showed them his hands, his pierced hands. Until Jesus showed them his side, his pierced side. Jesus did for Thomas just what he did for the ten. Jesus met them where they were. And where they were, they needed to touch, they needed to see. And as a result of the seeing, all came to believe.

Just as Jesus called Mary by name, and at the hearing of it, she was able to see that it was not the gardener standing outside the tomb, but Jesus. Jesus meets us where we are. Jesus gives us what we need so we too may come to believe.

“Blessed are those who believe without seeing” is not a scold...it is a promise. No generation since the first has seen the risen Lord as the Apostles did, yet every generation for 2000 years has come to believe that the risen preacher from Galilee is God incarnate.

Where do we meet the risen Lord? At the same place he met the apostles. He showed them his wounds. In his wounds they encountered Jesus once again. Gather any community together, and you will find wounds. You have them. So do I. Illness. A lost husband or wife, even a lost child. Divorce. Unemployment. Personal demons...Wounds are what we share.

And perhaps what Jesus is saying to us today is that at the intersection of our lives and our wounds, it is there we may encounter the risen Lord. “Perhaps the nail scarred Jesus meets us when we touch the scars of the wounded places in our own lives.” [Harnash, Strength Through Broken Places.]

To paraphrase Gene Petersen, a wound is a hole in the fence, where we might escape the smallness of the world as we would define it, and enter the vastness of a world defined by God.

The risen Jesus is not some spirit that pain cannot touch. Even in resurrection, he bears the marks, the scars, the wounds, for all eternity. They are transformed; but they remain.

And something else too: that breath that he breathed into them? It is the same breath God breathed into Adam. With God’s breath, a creature made of dirt became a human being. Now, with the breath of Jesus, human beings, you and I, are given back the place intended for us from the very beginning. To be little less than angels. To be sons and daughters of God.

And what is the sign of that restoration? It is in today’s gospel as well. Remember the ruckus Jesus caused as he went around forgiving sins? The best people were outraged. Only God can forgive sins! Except today, Jesus gives us that power. Power to forgive. Power to withhold forgiveness. This amazing power, given to us by the God who forgives us all.

Forgiveness is the sign of this new life we share.

Come, he invites, touch my wounds; touch your own, and see me alive in the deepest mysteries of your life. See me when you ask for forgiveness. See me when you give it.

Do not be unbelieving, but believe!

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