

Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31

We should all aspire to be like Thomas.

Yes, I know that he's been dubbed "doubting" Thomas, but to be fair, he's only one of the doubting disciples in the wake of Jesus's resurrection. Mary Magdalene thinks the risen Jesus is the gardener until he calls her by name, and the other disciples refuse to believe her when she tells them who she's seen. *They* remain behind locked doors...and themselves don't seem to recognize that the man who suddenly appears among them is Jesus...until, yes, he shows them the wounds in his hands and side. Thomas's reluctance to believe what his fellow disciples tell him afterward is hardly different than their refusal to believe Mary's story of her encounter in the garden.

Until Jesus's arrest and crucifixion, Thomas had been all in as a faithful follower of Jesus. He was one of the 12 disciples whom Jesus commissioned to proclaim the good news and to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons – the very things that Jesus himself did. Thomas was with Jesus when he healed the woman who had hemorrhaged for a dozen years, and the man with the withered hand, and the men who were blind and deaf. He watched Jesus cast out the demons from the man in Gerasene and helped him feed the 5,000. He saw him raise Jairus's daughter and the widow's son at Nain and Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus from the dead, so even resurrection itself was not impossible for him to believe.

Thomas was also brave. When Jesus told his disciples that they were going back into Judea to tend to Lazarus – even though they had *just* escaped from the Judean authorities who had tried to arrest and stone Jesus for blasphemy – Thomas rallied his fellow disciples despite the very real

danger of death for Jesus and the rest of them. "Let us also go, that we might die with him," he encouraged them.

And, of course, Thomas was with Jesus in for those final days in Jerusalem. He was there at the Last Supper when Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another as he had loved them. Among the barrage of things that Jesus assured the disciples that night was that they knew the way to the place that he was preparing for them in God's house. It was Thomas who wasn't afraid to say that they *didn't* know the way and to ask Jesus how they could. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus reminded Thomas. Thomas believed him. Thomas believed that the forces of light would overcome the forces of darkness.

But the crucifixion changed everything. We can only imagine how shattered Thomas was – after all that he'd witnessed and partaken of...all the healings and the miracles...all the proclamations that God's kingdom had come near – it was not enough. It was worse than not enough because Jesus not only died, he died a horrific death at the hands of the Jewish and Roman authorities he had defied for so long. Thomas and the other "believers" had deserted him. That talk about the way, and the truth, and the life must have seemed like a cruel joke. Now *they* lived in fear for their own lives, their hopes and dreams crushed.

So we can imagine Thomas's incredulity when the other disciples claimed that they had seen Jesus. He was already devastated by what seemed like the end of all that he had believed in. He felt guilty about his own cowardice. What the other disciples now claimed was beyond his ability to comprehend. He'd been hurt enough already. Heck, yes, he was a doubter. Thomas wanted his own proof – to see Jesus with his own eyes, to put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in his side.

Jesus gives Thomas exactly what he needs. This time Thomas is there when Jesus suddenly appears. "Peace be with you," he greets the group

without a shred of rebuke, even though they had denied and deserted him when he needed them most. Then he looks at Thomas and invites him to do exactly what Thomas has said that he needs – to put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in his side. But Thomas doesn't have to touch to believe. "My Lord and my God!" It is in the fullness of the moment – the grace and forgiveness *and* the sight of the wounds – that Thomas knows that God is and has been fully revealed in Jesus: in the healing and the feeding and the care for all who have been marginalized; in the welcome for all who turn to him; in the tender love for all creation. Jesus's wounds connect to the wounds of Thomas's grief and guilt and hopelessness and transform them into his powerful witness to what St. Paul would later proclaim: that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."¹

All of us are invited into that kind of transformation, whatever we encounter. Death or divorce or illness. Addiction or abuse. The loss of something we hoped for or believed would be part of our life forever. The fear of anything that scares us – whether it's under the bed or at a border. The horror of meanness in our own lives or in the terror and tyranny that rampages throughout the world. What the story of Thomas asks us to believe is exactly what Jesus asks Thomas and the other disciples to believe – that the love of God can transform that *whatever* into a force of healing and wholeness for ourselves and for the world. It is Jesus's forgiveness of the disciples' fear and guilt and lack of faith that frees them from behind locked doors and propels them to the ends of the earth to proclaim the power of that love, and here we are today.

¹ Romans 8:38-39.

Here we are today – a community of Thomases, after all. In individual lives and as a community, Ascension has been transformed by the willingness to believe in the message of God's love and to share it within our walls and out in the world. You are not afraid to ask questions and to wrestle with the hard things that knock at the door...this is, after all, where faith and real life intersect. But the beacon of your faith is a light in the lives of each of you as individuals, in this community, and beyond. It has been a joy and an honor to walk beside you.

Peace be with you.

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