

Resurrection of the body

Every year, on the Sunday following Easter Day, we have the story of Thomas, the disciple. The Orthodox Church calls this day “Thomas Sunday.” I know that many people think of this disciple as the one who doubted, and often refer to him as ‘Doubting Thomas,’ but in the scriptures, he is not called that; he is called Thomas the Twin. Scholars are not sure who the other twin was. Some suggest he may have looked like Jesus and was called his twin. Others suggest he is symbolically our twin, one who is like all disciples. This morning let’s hear again the story of a twin and see what it may have to teach us.

John’s gospel describes that on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene discovered that the tomb was empty. She ran to tell Peter and John, who go back to the tomb and see that Jesus is not there. They then leave. Mary Magdalene stays, and she begins talking with a person she thinks must be the gardener. He then calls her by name, and Mary realizes it is Jesus. She is told to go announce the news to Peter and the others, which she does.

But the disciples do not yet understand, and that very evening, they were hiding behind locked doors out of fear. Suddenly Jesus came in, stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you.” Jesus showed them his wounded hands and side. And he spoke with them, and breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit. In both Greek and Hebrew the word for Spirit is the same word for breath and wind. The disciples, encountering the Risen Lord for themselves, rejoiced and believed.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not there. We don’t know why. But he did not experience the risen Lord as the others had, and he tells them, “Unless I see the

mark of the nails in his hands, and unless I can touch this – like the rest of you – unless I can see and put my finger in those wounds I will not believe.”

A week later, a week after Easter Sunday, the disciples are gathered again in a house with the doors shut, and Jesus appears to them once more. This time Thomas is there. Jesus did not criticize Thomas for his doubts. He gave him an invitation to move beyond them to a deeper faith. “Thomas, come and put your finger here, see my hands and side. Do not doubt but believe.” Doubting doesn’t mean you are hopelessly weak or bad. It means you have some questions. Doubting is not the problem. What matters is that we bring those questions, and those doubts into the clear light of faith, into the presence of God.

Thomas, the one who wasn’t sure, who had not yet seen the risen Lord, God bless him, he still showed up the next Sunday. All of us here, on this Sunday after Easter, are doing what our twin did. And Jesus came to him and blessed him for that. We don’t always need to be certain about everything. God is simply asking that we show up, and listen, and learn, and grow. When we come to God, we are invited to bring all of who we are, like Thomas, our twin, did. There is where Jesus will meet us.

As Thomas encounters Jesus, notice what happens. It had seemed that Thomas wanted proof. “Let me touch and see in order to believe,” he had said. But what Thomas received was not so much proof as it was presence - the very real presence of the living Christ. As it turns out, proof wasn’t necessary after all; there is no indication that Thomas ever took Jesus up on the offer to poke his finger in the wounds. Meeting Jesus is so powerful, so life-changing, that Thomas proclaims the most exalted confession of faith spoken: “Jesus, you are my Lord and my God.”

The author Madeline L'Engle tells the story of when her daughter was very young and one night, she woke up in bed terribly frightened. L'Engle went to her little girl and comforted her. After a minute or two, she turned to leave, but the girl wanted her to say. So, Madeline offered a rather standard theological expression; she said, "Don't be afraid, dear, God will be with you." Her daughter replied, "I know that Mommy, but I need somebody with skin on."

Somebody with skin on. That is what the Christian faith believes. We do not just have an idea of God, or a concept of the resurrection. The scriptures don't say that following the empty tomb, the disciples simply sat around and said, "Let's think about Jesus and remember him, because as long as he is in our thoughts and hearts, he will live on." That may be a nice thing to do, but it is not scriptural, and it is not resurrection.

What really comforts us, and what really connects with us is someone with skin on. When the Risen Christ came to the disciples, it was as a real presence. The stories suggest there was something different, and the person was not always initially recognized to be Jesus: Mary Magdalene at the tomb thought she was seeing the gardener; the two disciples on the road to Emmaus mistook him to be a mere traveling companion.

But when their eyes were opened, they realized who this was: Jesus, the Risen One. The Christian faith is not merely intellectual, or "spiritual," in the vague, feel-good kind of way misuse that word these days. Christianity is incarnate - in the body. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." It is in the flesh. Incarnate, sacramental. Sacramental means that God uses the ordinary stuff of this world and makes it to be the alive with God's grace. We use water and declare that it is the very thing that gives us new life and forgiveness in baptism. We hold simple bread in our hands,

and taste it, and drink the wine and proclaim this is the Body and Blood of Christ and we take this mystery and this reality into our own bodies. And then we call ourselves, the church, we humans, the Body of Christ.

When the resurrected Jesus appeared to his friends, they experienced and knew that it really was him. He had a body, a voice, a presence. This is the Jesus they had known. The gospels make it clear: here is someone who eats, and breathes; someone who talks with them, and knows them. This Jesus, as always, is someone with skin on, with the wounded hands and feet and side. "Go on," Jesus says, "touch these wounds, feel how real this is." And the disciples somehow knew, deep down, "This truly is Jesus, the one we have loved, the one we know." And when they heard their friend and teacher say, "Peace be with you," it wasn't a vague concept, like "Don't worry, dear, God will be with you." No, it was God with some skin on, the risen Lord.

We believe in the resurrection. The scriptures describe not merely the concept of death and resurrection. It is real death and real resurrection; that is why these stories are so powerful. Jesus died, and Jesus rose again. When someone you love dies, you don't miss an idea, you grieve "some body." You miss their eyes, the way they laughed, or spoke with their hands, you miss all the things you knew about them. Resurrection tells us that in Jesus, and in us, this will not be lost.

After Thomas professed his belief, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have come to believe." That means you and me. We will not see the risen Christ in the same way that Thomas and the others did in those first days following the resurrection. And yet, we are called to believe. And the only way that happens, the only way we will come to believe is to experience Christ for ourselves. No one can do that for you. Mary Magdalene could not do it for the Peter and the others. Peter and all the rest could not do it for Thomas. And your friends, your family, your

church, or priest cannot do it for you. People can tell you about Jesus, they can share the good news of God's love. But you need to encounter Christ for yourself. You need to spend some time with Jesus. You need to discover God's grace and new life in your own story. Not Thomas' story, not someone else's, not mine, but yours.

Resurrection is about new life. And resurrection is about God's love. You cannot prove love and you cannot prove resurrection, but you know when you are in their presence. Like Mary Magdalene and Thomas, disciples somehow know when they are in the presence of Christ. They carry light within them, and peace, and joy, and life. And it wells up within them and is given to others. That is what God desires for us, and what is given to us in Christ. The disciples believed that the life and love of God does not end at the grave. The tomb is empty, and the life of Christ is now out and alive in the world. Jesus breathes on his disciples to remind them that this same spirit is in them. In us. We carry the life and the love of God.

Like Thomas, our twin, may we know Christ and make Christ known. Amen.

Trace Browning

2nd Week of Easter – Year B

Acts 4:32-35 • Psalm 133 • 1 John 1:1-2:2 • John 20:19-31

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