

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Easter II

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how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any—lifted from the no of all nothing—human merely being doubt unimaginable You? now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened. Amen.

Today's gospel story raises some interesting questions. Should my belief be predicated on evidence? Do I need to see before I believe? What if I am blind or I have some disability that would preclude me from seeing, touching, hearing, smelling or even tasting? Should the invitation of faith be exclusionary? Thomas wasn't thinking about all these as he battled with his friends over the improbable story of the resurrection. This day represents for me the ultimate invitation of faith, the imperative of doubt and the practice of questioning. Peter Abelard a French Scholastic writes that "The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth." We misunderstand Thomas for each carries within himself or herself the desire of Thomas, to come to the truth, not by being spoon-fed, but by questioning. And the truth our questioning produces for us is one of worship-my Lord and my God, because we cannot access the fullness of God.

For two thousand years, Christians have made a claim that one man, Jesus of Nazareth, was a unique man who represented the total in-breaking of God into human affairs. Christians also maintain that this unique man died and rose again to a new life: a life that was totally different from pre-Easter life. Christians believe that the uniqueness of Christ is also reflected in the fact that he was the son of God who died for us so that all may have life. This claim was such a radical outlier which represented a total break from the norm, and Thomas wasn't ready to buy it. The assurance of his friends could not convince him that the Lord is indeed risen and that he had appeared to them as we read in the gospel story.

Understand Thomas, the crucifixion has been a total shock for him and his friends. They believed that they would suffer the same fate. And so they hid themselves. But as they sat together thinking about the what next, the one in whom they had believed, the one for whom they had left their individual endeavors to follow and for whom they felt dejected by his nonviolent submission to death, stood in their midst and proclaimed peace. Thomas was not around when the risen Christ visited. And when his ecstatic friends shared the good news of the improbable story, he would have none of that.

In as much as Thomas was right in questioning the veracity of the claim by his friends, the point where Thomas went overboard, the slippery slope which is all too familiar to us, was when he placed premium on an evidence supporting belief by stating that “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” For Thomas then, even the sight of the wounds would not be enough, he had to touch them in order to believe.

Before the resurrection, Jesus was within space and time, but after the resurrection he became one who was beyond space and time that’s why he could come into a room without unlocking a door, and be eternally present with us even though he could not be seen. He wasn’t present when Thomas made his provocative statement, but when he reappeared, he challenged Thomas as though he was with them when Thomas made the statement. He invited Thomas to put his finger in his wounds and see his hands. All that Thomas could say in response was “My Lord and my God.” This was the only affirming statement he could ever make. It is always a moment of worship when you know nothing else can replace the utter amazement of seeing the fullness of God. If I did not know, now I know. God. The God who is beyond human comprehension. We cannot access the fullness of God. We can only touch but a part of God.

I am sure you are familiar with the cliché, seeing is believing- to believe is predicated on the ability to see, and so the eye, and to an extent the hand, by Thomas’ standard, becomes an important part of our ability to authenticate faith. The question then is, what about you and me? What about those of us who are far removed from the original story? And if our faith is to thrive or fall on supporting evidence, what then is the point of faith? We do not have to see to believe. We can ask questions but faith isn’t about certainty, nor does it lend itself to certainty. Faith is about our ability to worship and respond ‘My Lord and my God’ even when things do not make sense to us. Remember, we cannot access the fullness of God, we can only touch but a part of God.

There is a story of two patients who shared a room in a hospital. One was Peter and the other was John. Peter’s bed was by the window while John’s bed was by the door. A curtain separated the two patients and so John whose bed was by the door could not see through the windows. Each morning, John would call out to Peter and ask questions about what was going on outside. Peter who didn’t know what to say developed the habit of describing activities he presumably saw outside his window. Peter would say, it is so beautiful outside, I can see kids playing, people walking their dogs, people having lunch or simply relaxing on the beautiful lawn. John took great comfort in the daily update of life outside his window. One morning when John called out to Peter, there was deafening silence. He called out again, there was no response and so he bugged a nurse. When the nurse arrived, he asked her where Peter was, Peter passed away last night. Said the nurse. John’s disappointment was searing. Why was John so uncontrollable in his grief?

John later told the nurse that because Peter slept by the window, he always told him all that he saw outside his window. The nurse was shocked. What? She asked. But Mr. Peter was blind. How could he be

telling you all that when he was blind? John was stunned. You mean he was blind? Yes, he was blind. I did not know he was blind. John said.

John had always assumed that his roommate could see. We can all agree that Peter was exaggerating. But why wouldn't he if he knew that would bring some solace to his fellow patient? John simply believed what he was told. But this kind of attitude is not what our Christian faith requires of us. Our faith invites us to doubt-for doubt is not the opposite of faith but a component of faith itself. Peter Abelard would say elsewhere "It is by doubting that we come to investigate, and by investigating that we recognize the truth." And the truth is that the Lord who invites you touch, only demands our worship.

There's a story in the gospel of Mark where a man complains to Jesus that he brought his son who had been overrun by spirits to be healed by the disciples but they could not heal him. In response, Jesus tells him that all things are possible for one who believes, the man shouted "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." Therein lies the paradox of the Christian struggle-faith and doubt. In as much as we are prone to believing, we cannot help but to doubt as well.

Like Thomas, we have to question without assuming that whatever we hear or read is the end-all-be all. We become mere pitiful consumers if we fail to question or doubt, it is by questioning and doubting that we are awakened to worship. Not that our questioning will provide the answers that we need or seek, but a mature religious life is ordinarily shaped within the workshop of doubt. That is why worship becomes possible because we know we cannot access the fullness of God.

It saddens my heart to hear Muslims kill Christians in Sri Lanka or a lone gun man walk into a synagogue, injures nineteen people and kills one person, in San Diego-simply on the basis of their faith. To me, faith is the very art of human enterprise to which we must approach with humility, grace and utter amazement that none of us can access the fullness of God, and like Lyla who would be baptized today, we can only touch but a part of God and when we do, we only respond in worship like Thomas said "My Lord and my God." Amen.