

My Lord and My God!

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 19 2009

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The major player in the gospel drama which we read on this second Sunday of Easter is one with whom modern persons should feel a great deal of empathy. Over the years Thomas, who has been labeled as "the doubter", has received a fair amount of bad press. He alone of the early disciples seemed to be lacking in his faith, in his ability to believe in the resurrection.

But I feel very close to Thomas. It seems to me that he, more than the others, is the representative of modern humanity in the New Testament. For Thomas is the disciple with our age's concern for scientific facts. He was the kind of person who did not rush to conclusions based on emotional reactions, without first weighing and considering the available evidence. Thomas was the realist.

He was also a brave and faithful friend to Jesus. It was Thomas, as Jesus led his disciples towards Jerusalem, who understood the danger into which they were walking. He was not blinded by the popular acclaim. He was convinced of the peril that faced them all. And yet it was Thomas, fully aware of the danger that lay ahead, who said to his friends, "Come, let us go too, that we may die with him."

Good, brave, courageous, realistic Thomas- whose willingness to stay with Jesus was the more impressive because of his realism. It is *this* Thomas who in John's gospel is faced with the prospect of dying with his Lord. At the meal in the upper room, Jesus has been speaking in symbols-- a language which is hard for Thomas to comprehend. His mind is not fixed on the tremendous truth of the Christ's Eucharistic sacrifice, but on what for him is a nearer reality-- the angry hoards of officials ready, it seemed, to break down the door at any moment.

Thomas listens partially to Jesus and partially to the sounds in the street outside. If anyone was on watch that night, it was probably Thomas. It is with growing agitation that he hears his teacher speak of heavenly mansions. He knows what is likely to happen. The dark spectre of death stands before him, with the power that only a realist can comprehend.

For the Master whom he has followed along the dusty roads of Palestine, whose teachings he loves and whose presence he needs, is to be wrested from him and executed. He is as sure of this as he is of anything and all else fades to unreality beside this knowledge. Small wonder that his anxiety in that situation cannot be contained. Small wonder that he interrupts the teacher to voice his doubt: "Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way?"

It is unlikely that Thomas was comforted by Jesus' answer-- "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." For Thomas this was another riddle, inappropriate for this time of mortal danger. I can understand Thomas. He is, indeed, a man born before his times. His realism brings with it a skepticism born of intellectual honesty. His thinking function is more highly developed than his feeling function. I am sure that he was like many men in our modern culture-- apparently more head than heart, slow to express deep emotions, competent in science and business but fumbling in human relationships.

We can understand Thomas well. Even after several decades of men discovering their feeling side, taking on a greater role in the rearing of children, joining men's groups and expressing their rage and their love for absent fathers-- still there is that strain of character in many of us that is uncomfortable with real emotion. It is still hard for many men in relationships to say the words "I love you."

And we have certainly been trained to regard scientific evidence as central to any understanding of truth. We need to see, touch and measure results before we will truly commit ourselves. So Thomas' reaction is understandable-- and we can empathize especially with his reaction on that first Easter week.

With his particular character, Thomas must not have had much use for the more emotional and volatile of the apostles. He may have watched with some disgust over the several years of Jesus' ministry at the emotional outbursts of Peter and the others, of their failure to understand the political implications of Jesus' actions, and their readiness to believe everything without question.

Now there had been the tale of Mary at the grave, and the men claimed that Jesus had appeared to them, risen, in the upper room. Thomas had been out, probably walking the streets with his own private grief, when the rumored appearance had occurred. This final tale was too much for him to take. He wanted to believe, God knows. There was that element in him that envied the other apostles and their unquestioning faith. But he was just not made that way. He was, as I say, like many of us. And so he lays down his terms. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand into his side, I will not believe."

I wonder what the next week must have been like for Thomas. His confusion and pain must have been overwhelming! He was being asked to do what had been impossible for him in the past and is so difficult for us today. He was being asked to put his brain in neutral and his heart in full gear forward. He heard all of his friends talking about their varied experiences of the previous week. He probably grilled them over and over, trying to find holes in their stories.

Thomas was one who had been with Jesus on the road. He had seen apparent miracles of healing, and had sat and listened with rapt attention to the powerful teachings. His loyalty had been won, and he had willingly followed this strange rabbi into the teeth of confrontation in Jerusalem. But he was being asked to make a leap of faith that went against his grain, and the week must have been one long struggle for him.

Then, John tells us, a week later they were met again in the same place, probably for worship. The doors were shut again, locked against real and imagined enemies. The story is simple and clear. Suddenly, Jesus was there among them. And this time, Thomas was present. In this beautiful story of Jesus' response to the needs of his skeptical apostle, the Risen Lord says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Do not doubt, but believe."

One can only imagine the overwhelming rush of emotion that swept over Thomas as, in the face of all reason, Jesus stood before him. Suddenly the floodgates opened. It was not that his thinking function was obliterated, but it gave way to a deeper and a higher reality. Dimensions of life which he had never dreamed of appeared before him, and he fell on his knees with the explosive declaration of true faith-- "My Lord and my God!"

In the gospel story, Jesus met the demands of his skeptical apostle. But in meeting them He also utters the words which come through the centuries to meet us, a generation of skeptics. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

These words, of course, were meant by John to touch those generations not present at those early events, and who were not first-hand witnesses to the resurrection itself. They call us to the dimension experienced by Thomas, without the immediate proof he so desired. Perhaps it is a bit easier in our day-- for the scientific curiosity that marks the character of Thomas has led us to revelations about the universe which would have seemed as unbelievable to him as the resurrection itself.

Our understanding of the unfolding universe, of the explosion of galaxies and stars, of the intermingling fields of matter and energy, of the secrets locked in the atom and in the human soul, would have been totally alien to Thomas and beyond his wildest dreams.

Is it so hard for us, with all of our knowledge that has pushed to the boundaries of reality itself, to accept the experience of the resurrection? For generations who have seen for themselves the power locked in the atom, and have experienced in our history the devastating effects of that power in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the veil between matter and energy is thin indeed.

So even with our skeptical modern minds, we, too may find the presence of Christ as a living reality. Open your hearts to faith, and fall, before the figure that stretches out the arms of love towards us, promising with that love eternal life. And on our knees may we proclaim with Thomas the final and explosive affirmation of our Christian Faith--- "My Lord and My God!!"