

Seeing and Believing
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Second Sunday of Easter, RCL Lectionary Easter 2A
March 30, 2008

Every year, this second Sunday of Easter, we get to hear about Thomas. Doubting Thomas, unbelieving Thomas, party pooper Thomas. We're still singing alleluias and watering the lilies, and scarfing down the chocolate, when Thomas finally shows up with his unreasonable demands and defense lawyer attitude. For Thomas, the disciples' testimony is all well and good, but physical evidence is ever so much better. For something as important as this, Thomas feels it is absolutely necessary. Thomas is a man of his world—and ours.

For example, let's take a look at our legal system: how many court cases are defeated—or never even come to trial--because of a lack of physical evidence? The need to see, hear, handle or otherwise physically experience the murder weapon, the bank documents, the telling recorded conversation is very human, and central to our justice system. In a world full of shaky memories and biased attitudes, we crave clear and convincing proof. We want something we can put our hands on—we want something real. Just like Thomas, often we want to see in order to believe.

Thomas is very much a practical man, honest, and straightforward, and did not look for the meaning behind the meaning of Jesus' words. His faith, such as it is, was one of logic and reason and based on what he can see or hear or feel. He accepts that Jesus is from God, and has been a witness to many of the signs and has attentively listened to Jesus' teaching. All the evidence pointed to Jesus as Messiah: the feeding of the 5000, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. For Thomas, seeing is believing—and what he has just seen this past Friday has been heart breaking: Jesus arrested, beaten, crucified; Jesus, dead and buried. Thomas' hopes have been dashed, his very life may be in danger. It may be that he feels foolish for believing at all.

So when his fellow disciples tell him that they have seen the Lord, he cannot share their joy. He was not there to receive Jesus' peace, hear his voice, feel the breath of the Holy Spirit.

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He is still trapped in the sorrow and darkness that once enveloped them as well. As much as he would like to believe them, he cannot take that chance. His shattered heart cannot stand one more disappointment. If he is going to believe in a resurrected Jesus, he wants cold, hard proof—he will not be hurt again. For Thomas, Easter had not yet come.

Jesus knew the brokenness of Thomas' heart, he knew Thomas' struggle with belief and unbelief. The disciples' testimony should have been enough for Thomas, but it was not. So, as he is willing to do for all of us, Jesus met Thomas at his point of need. He appeared again to his disciples, this time with Thomas present. In his love, Jesus offered himself completely to Thomas. For Thomas, longing to believe but stuck in the darkness, it was more than enough. Jesus' presence, his loving offer, were enough to heal the sorrow and the heartbreak, and drive away all the darkness surrounding Thomas' faith. Thomas had seen, and believed. At last, Easter had come in all its glory for Thomas, and he responded in the only way he could—giving himself over to his Lord. His faith moved from being one grounded in the intellect to one centered in the heart.

Now that his eyes and heart were opened, Thomas could shift to believing in order to see—and his vision was quite clear. The Jesus that he knew and loved, the Jesus who ate and drank with them, the Jesus who had died and had now risen—that Jesus was one being with God. Thomas the unbeliever had become Thomas the revealer, being the first among his peers to grasp the truth of Jesus' identity, and declare it aloud. Practical and logical Thomas becomes the first to glimpse the mystery of Jesus' two natures.

However, mystery is increasingly out of vogue in our 21st century American society—unless it is a mystery we can solve with our knowledge, science, and technology. From diseases

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to the source of physical life itself—all is fair game for our insatiable curiosity and need to know. Such a mindset has a danger of producing a church full of Thomases—those whose faith is based on intellectual assent and technical knowledge. It is not enough to memorize the catechism or recite Scripture verbatim or to have read all the latest books on Jesus and the newly discovered ‘gospels’. Don’t get me wrong—there is nothing wrong with being a well-informed Christian. The trouble, however, is when we settle for knowing the stories and sayings of Jesus, but do not take the time to know Jesus himself. When we fail to do that, we settle for a second-hand faith.

Jesus knows that belief that is based on ‘intellectual assent’ and technical knowledge is too easily washed away when troubles rage and unimaginable things occur. A second hand faith is not enough to sustain us through this life. Seeing may indeed lead to believing, but if all you see is suffering and pain and fear, it is easy to get stuck in the darkness and lose one’s way. That is why Jesus places himself at our disposal, meeting us at our point of need, like he did for Thomas. All we need do is be willing to open our hearts to believing—in spite of what we see. It is then that our eyes can be open to seeing the Easter glory the lies beyond the grief of Good Friday.

Doing this is often a struggle. So many times we get stuck in Good Friday, not believing that the Good News of Easter is for us as well. That the bonds of sin and death have been broken, that Jesus died to set us free, that we are loved beyond all measure—it all seems too good to be true. Deep within my own heart, if I am honest with myself, I have my own moments of unbelief. I slip back into darkness of Good Friday, forgetting to live the love that I have been called to share and proclaim. Like Thomas, I want to see so that I may believe; I crave something to hold onto—something real.

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But reality is so much bigger than what I can see, what I can touch or feel or hold. Love, the reality that forms and sustains all of existence as we know it, is always so much larger and deeper—and mysterious—than my bodily senses can detect and process. It is love that brings forth light out of the darkness, freedom out of bondage, life out of death. It is God’s love, Jesus’ love, which calls to us in our moments of unbelief, asking us to trust that which is beyond our finite understanding. It is a love that is only seen through the eyes of faith—and which can move us out of our Good Fridays into Easter joy.

So, this second Sunday of Easter, I suppose it is only fitting that we hear about Thomas. His story of struggle, of seeing and believing, is our story as well. It is a story of journey, taking that seemingly long trip from the mind to the heart, from Friday to Sunday. When we do so, our transformed lives become the evidence of the good news of Christ’s resurrection, helping others to see our new lives so that they may believe—“and that through believing, (they) may have life in his name.”

Amen.