

Faith in the Face of Fear and Doubt

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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I know this is not so much an Episcopal thing, but we have all probably seen some variation of that classic church painting of Jesus patiently waiting in front of a closed door. He's there, leaning in, gently knocking, in hopes that someone on the other side might answer. It's this painting that represents a classic theological metaphor for how Jesus is waiting for us, knocking at the door of our lives, and all we have to do is just open it up and let him in. But, if there is any Sunday that we can scripturally refute that image and that theology, it is today. Because today we have biblical evidence that closed, even locked doors will not keep Jesus away from us.

Setting the scene, our Gospel this morning from John, begins by telling us that in the days following Jesus' death and subsequent resurrection, the disciples are in fear that they might be the next to be crucified, so they are all together locked up in a house, away from the Jewish authorities.

And it all makes me wonder about how even though we know the end of the story about how Jesus broke free from the tomb, we too like the disciples are still locking ourselves up in our own houses of fear. Whether it be fear of the other, fear of the future, fear of failure, we try to insulate ourselves from the worst case scenarios we imagine in our minds. But, no matter the ways in which we try to separate ourselves from those things that give us fear, Jesus doesn't let that stop him from sharing with us peace, and breathing on us the Holy Spirit.

Jesus appears, stands among us in our houses of fear and offers to us a peace that liberating spirit that frees us from the limits and isolation that fear imposes on us. But that's just the beginning of the story.

There is another character who we haven't met yet, and channeling my best Aaron Burr from the musical Broadway Musical Hamilton, "You simply must me Thomas!" Thomas is the one who was mysteriously away when Jesus appears that first time. What was he doing? Why wasn't he seized with fear and locked in the house with the rest of the disciples? I find this to be a remarkable aspect to this story, because while Thomas, or doubting Thomas, as he has been more commonly labeled by the church, has for so long been used as our own personal punching bag, maybe Thomas' courage is something to be held up and admired.

Thomas has for years been held up as this disciple not to be emulated because he doubts and insists on touching Christ's wounds in order for him to believe that Christ actually did return while Thomas was away, but on the other hand, Thomas was not held captive by his fear, and that is quite admirable. Reducing this story to be centered on Thomas' doubt is too simplistic and it he has been used unfairly as a cautionary character to convince us that doubt is somehow something we should try to avoid.

But I do not believe that doubt is avoidable, I think it is inevitable, and it is an integral part of faith. In the words of Anne Lamott, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty." Doubting Thomas in this way can reclaim the doubt that has been used by the Church to diminish him, and even wear that title as a badge of honor. In an interesting turn of events, we could even thank Thomas for his honest and vulnerable confession of doubt.

Beyond that, every Christian community needs a Thomas to stay connected with the wounds, without which our faith gets cuts off from real life and reduced to an intellectual exercise where we live in denial of our doubt, and we separate from the rest of the world and surround ourselves with others who believe like we do.

One of my favorite songs is called Hymn #35 and it's by an artist named Joe Pug. In it he eloquently strums and sings of all the paradox that encompasses his identity. It's a beautiful song, and my favorite lyric from it is when he sings, "I am faith I am belief, except for when I'm not."

We all exist on the spectrum between faith and doubt and it's in that tension that we can relate to Thomas. To blame Thomas for his need to comprehend the resurrection with empirical evidence, we would be suggesting that doubt can be avoided. The truth is that we cannot fail to have doubts because, as Martin Luther said, we are unable to believe on our own, but the Holy Spirit comes to us to give us faith.

It's that same Holy Spirit that we receive from the breath of Jesus as he breaks in to our houses of fear. It's that same body of Christ that Thomas is invited to touch that we touch today at this table of communion moving us from fear, and filling us with faith.

As Thomas touches Jesus' hands and side his confession moves from "Unless I see, I will not believe." to "My Lord and My God" This remains to be one of the most profound statements of faith for us to echo in our own life and prayer.

Thomas in his doubt is given something real, something tangible to touch and see. And In these days of Eastertide that we might also proclaim Christ is Risen indeed Alleluia! But we too want something real to touch and to know that Christ truly is risen. In our doubt we might want to reduce the resurrection to something less than real because it's easier to believe, but I believe we can double down on the realness of the resurrection even in the face of extreme fear and doubt. And in the words of John Updyke's Seven Stanzas at Easter:

Make no mistake: if he rose at all It was as His body; If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit, The amino acids rekindle, The Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers, Each soft spring recurrent; It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the Eleven apostles; It was as His flesh; ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes The same valved heart That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then regathered Out of enduring Might New strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping, transcendence, Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded Credulity of earlier ages: Let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache, not a stone in a story, But the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of Time will eclipse for each of us The wide light of day.

And if we have an angel at the tomb, Make it a real angel, Weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair, opaque in The dawn light, robed in real linen Spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous, For our own convenience, our own sense of beauty, Lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed By the miracle, And crushed by remonstrance.

Today you may be here filled with fear and doubt and that is ok. Jesus is not waiting for us to get our house in order and open the door. Jesus is breaking the houses we lock ourselves up in offers to us peace and breathes on us the liberating Holy Spirit that frees us. And if that image is too abstract for you and you need something more real to touch and to taste, come to the table, and like Thomas, experience Jesus' real presence with you. Through that real experience of resurrection, the Spirit is at work, giving us ordinary, fearful, doubting people extraordinary boldness to declare, "My Lord and my God."