

An Easter Sermon

Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Believe

Text: John 20:19-20; 24-29

This account of “doubting” Thomas in the Gospel of John is as instructive today as when it was first written. It pulls us up short. It reminds us that even to an ancient person the idea that someone could return to life and appear as somewhat ordinary after death was preposterous. Even though this is the same Thomas who was present when Jesus announced the death of Lazarus (Jn 11:16), and we know what happened after that, then, as today, Thomas’ reaction is understandable. Thomas did not just doubt. He expressed *flat out* refusal to believe.

This veto against belief is something that confronts believers today. In the past several years there have emerged in our culture several highly touted books that should be deeply troubling to we who believe. Chief among them is Richard Dawkins’ screed, “The God Delusion.” In it he mocks the faith of believers. He considers it beneath contempt. To paraphrase another prominent writer, “Our faith in the God of Abraham and Jesus is grounded no more solidly in reality than belief in Zeus.” We are all used to those maudlin English poets who wrote at the end of the Victorian era. They struggled and agonized over whether they could maintain faith. Yet, at least, they knew that if we lost our faith, we would lose a treasure of incomparable worth. But today, people like Dawkins and Sam Harris growl and supinely observe that such belief is totally out of court for the intelligent person. We consider that in the final analysis they are no different than Thomas. In a strange way they capture the heart of what he was saying:

Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my
fingers in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I
will not believe (John 29:25).

Thomas refused to believe. But, in a bizarre way it has a sniff of integrity. I sometimes wonder whether this confrontational response is more commendable than the complacency that many of us show when Easter rolls around each year. “Oh, it is Easter – summer will soon be here!”

This complacency is a far cry from the shock and bewilderment of the women who came to the tomb in an old quarry in Jerusalem on Easter morning. Mary Magdalene put it very well:

They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they
have laid him (Jn 29:13).

Yes, from Mary of Magdala and Thomas to Richard Dawkins, the idea that the course of creation moving from life to death has been reversed is a troubling – even a preposterous proposal. On what grounds can we claim that this particular event in history marks the new creation? And how can we claim it brings a different reality? How can we say from henceforth the movement of the created order is now from death to life? No wonder some are troubled!

Our Confrontation with Jesus

Let us return to Thomas. As we have hinted, Thomas is a peculiar type. In a real sense he has been mislabeled. We call him “doubting” Thomas. But Thomas’ problem is not just doubt; it is a downright refusal to accept what had happened. He is like the nobleman who Jesus encountered earlier in his ministry and addressed:

Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe. (Jn 4:48)

Thomas not only demanded a sign or wonder as a basis of belief; By demanding physical contact with Jesus he even set up what type of sign he would accept! He erects a very high bar for faith to cross. Unless one can grasp a physically touchable body – no other proof will do – then the game is over. But wait. Thanks be to God that is not the end of Thomas’ story. Our text tells us that something else transpired that no one would have anticipated. On the very next Sunday after Easter the disciples were gathered again in a house. Now, this time Thomas was there. It was as though Jesus himself had been listening to those earlier words spoken by Thomas. Jesus appears before the disciples. He greets the company with a familiar greeting:

Peace be with you!

Then he turns to Thomas and he confronts him. For centuries artists have tried to capture it.

Put your finger here; see, here are my hands. Give me your hand,
place it into my side. Cease your refusal to believe.

And, you know, an amazing thing happened. Thomas no longer wishes to set any more conditions for believing. In fact, he doesn’t even accept the invitation to go over and examine Jesus. None of that seems to matter anymore. All that Thomas can do is to blurt out, “My Lord and my God.” He utters one of the highest attributions Jesus is given in the whole of Scripture. Something amazing has happened. Thomas has come to believe.

But in what sense does he believe? It seems that the key to the whole matter can be found centering around the matter of “seeing.” By not accepting the invitation to touch and feel Jesus’ side Thomas came to learn (“to see”) that demanding things fit our preconceived views of sense and sight are not as crucial as he supposed. In a strange way he came “to see” that believing depended upon something far more than physical sight; if it demanded that at all. To believe is to understand why Jesus came into this world in the first place; for us to learn to know truly the one who sent him.

It is a point of fascination to me that earlier Thomas, after the announcement of the death of Lazarus, announced, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” I do not claim to know all that is involved in this statement. But surely it is not too much of a stretch to say that to “see” or “believe” in Jesus is to affirm the same commitment that Jesus showed in going to the cross; to die to the old life and take hold of our share in the new creation which came into effect when Christ was glorified through the cross. Above all, for John, as he represents Jesus, intrinsic to his

life was his call for us to love one another – even as the Father loves the son, and he loved us enough to die for us.

Herein is the link between us and these ancient events. Thomas lived a long time ago. But he learned, just as we, that the blessedness of belief is to see the big picture about Jesus. That Jesus came from the bosom of the Father; that he manifested the works of the Father; and he continues to manifest his power in the world today through the faithful, loving lives of his disciples. In this way we see the Father.

Conclusion

We often talk about the beatitudes. By this we usually mean that list of beatitudes found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. But there is another beatitude in the Gospels and it comes at the end of our text today. It is spoken over the head of Thomas. It spans the centuries and comes directly to us:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

None of us has physically touched Jesus; but from the days of the humblest servants in the first century to those whom we see kindly encouraging others and graciously doing works of love, there continues to be a chain of those who truly believe, connecting all the way back to the Son. May we all grasp that chain and add links to it.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

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