

Reflection for Sunday, April 24, 2022

The Risen Existence

Because his witness to love was threatening, those exercising power sought to silence Jesus. He suffered abandonment and betrayal, state-sanctioned torture and execution. He was crucified. But death was not the last word. God raised Jesus from death, turning sorrow into joy, despair into hope. We sing of Jesus raised from the dead. We sing hallelujah. The Risen Christ lives today, present to us and the source of our hope.

May the peace of the Risen Christ be always with you.

Let us pray:

God of new life and new possibilities, we gather to sing our songs of gladness and to share your steadfast love. Some of us come from the shadows of our lives, as we anticipate the light. Some of us come eager to learn, but are unsure of what it all means. Some of us come in grief, grateful to discover hope. Wherever we have come from, may we all find you, the risen Christ, the one who conquered death and proclaims new life for all. O Risen Christ, you came to your fearful disciples and reassured them with your presence that the grave was not the end. Come to us each day, in times of goodness and times of trouble. Reassure us of God's eternal love and mercy. For we are like the disciples, afraid and needing assurance. We too need to know that you are here. Amen.

The disciples have sought refuge in a home out of fear; not fear of a contagion but of the authorities, perhaps fearing that they will suffer the same fate as Jesus. They are in collective 'self-isolation' except for Thomas. John doesn't explain why Thomas is absent. Perhaps he was designated to get provisions, or, maybe, he just wanted to be left alone with his grief. Upon his return, his friends exclaim: "We have seen the Lord." But his response to this Easter proclamation is: "Unless I see, I will not believe."

If any biblical character suffers under a stereotype it is surely Thomas, or to give him his usual name, 'doubting Thomas.' Thomas is a fascinating mixture of doubt and fervent belief; to write him off as 'doubting' is to underestimate him. Thomas appears three times in John's Gospel. The first time we meet him, Jesus is on his

way to Lazarus who has died. The disciples are urging him not to go because of danger. Thomas declares that they should go so that ‘we may die with him’ (John 11:16). The second time, Jesus is talking about his death and about his Father’s house in which there are many dwelling places; that he is going to prepare a place for them and that they know the way. At this point Thomas bursts out with ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ (John 14:5). And then finally, here, in today’s Gospel episode, Thomas refuses to believe until he has seen the risen Jesus with his own eyes.

If we remove the stereotype from Thomas and encounter him as he truly is, then we discover not someone who believes too little (as the epithet ‘doubting Thomas’ suggests) but someone who believes passionately, deeply and with the whole of their being. Thomas only appears doubting because it matters so much to him; once he has worked out what it means, he is the clearest, most fervent believer of all. Herbert O’Driscoll offers this stirring portrait of Thomas: *“Far from being a doubter—the description forever attached to his name—Thomas is the consummate disciple, the one who thinks boldly, cares deeply, and loves passionately; the one who gives himself utterly to Jesus. Time would show that Thomas desperately wanted to believe in Jesus. When given the chance, he blurted out his steadfast faithfulness.”*

The story of Thomas, a heartbroken soul who overcomes skepticism, bitterness, and adversity, perhaps, even cynicism and grief, has never been more important. Perhaps it’s good to be reminded that many come to Easter not in joy but in grief, not in hope, but in fear. Some may have recently lost a loved one and so they come to Easter in a particularly poignant way. Others may be still dealing with unresolved grief (does grief ever ‘resolve’ in us?) For others, things are not going well and Easter, while not suspended, is muted. And if any of that accurately describes you—believing, not quite believing, full of joy yet fearful—then the story of Thomas is for you.

Many today long for friendship, community, meaning, and purpose, yearnings which have been exacerbated by the present crisis. The early Christian church, as described in Acts of the Apostles, ignited a groundswell of compassion and generosity. It became the epicenter of a movement toward peace, healing, and inclusivity. Brian McClaren describes Easter as an *“uprising of hope not hate; an uprising armed with love, not weapons; an uprising that shouts a joyful promise of*

life and peace, not angry threats of hostility and death; an uprising of outstretched hands, not clenched fists."

Here we see a church that, rather than having a 'mission program' or 'mission budget,' is itself a mission, a community of transformation. Here we find a community that embodies its faith in public practices, resurrection practices that constitute a visible and discernible way of life. Here we encounter a fluid, dynamic, on-the-move-body, one that struggles with internal and external challenges but always does so with a sense and experience of a faithful God, a living Lord, and a powerful and active Spirit. In Acts we discover clues to a new vitality, a new dynamism, a new way of being church for our time, characterized by a sense of adventure in place of our frequent preoccupation with survival, one characterized by a sense of hope and purpose in place of our despair or lack of direction. There is a sense of joy and excitement and adventure about being the church.

May it be so! Thanks be to God! Amen!

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