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Acts 4: 32 – 35
1 John 1:1 – 2:2Psalm 133
John 20: 19 - 31

*“Put your hand, Thomas,
on the crawling head of a child,
imprisoned, in a cot, in Romania.
Place your finger, Thomas,
on the list of those
who have disappeared in Chile.
Stroke the cheek, Thomas,
of the little girl,
sold into prostitution, in Thailand.
Touch, Thomas,
the gaping wounds of my world.
Feel, Thomas,
the primal wound, of my people.
Reach out your hands, Thomas,
and place them at the side of the poor.
Grasp my hands, Thomas,
and believe,
when you feel me in the world’s pain, and in the world’s
glory.”*

In her poem entitled, simply, *Thomas*, Kate McIlhagga cuts right to the chase. Thomas is to feel and to see and to know the *presence of Christ in the world* in the presence of woundedness. Thomas is to be the *presence of Christ in the world* in the presence of woundedness. Wherever there is pain and suffering in the world, Thomas is to identify with it through Christ. Wherever there is pain and suffering in the world, Thomas is to act with compassion and mercy and love through Christ.

Poor Thomas. Thomas has always received such bad press out of this particular passage in the Gospel of John. Forever known as ‘doubting Thomas,’ Thomas doesn’t do or ask anything more than any of the other disciples, nor does he do or ask anything more than most, if not all, of us would. We tend to forget the passage where Thomas courageously supports Jesus’ actions and expresses a willingness to die, if necessary, for the faith. We overlook the passage where Thomas is bright enough to question Jesus on where he is headed, and to know that it is more than a matter of mere geography. We forget that Thomas is associated with a non-canonical Gospel that records many of Jesus’ sayings. We do not remember that, according to tradition, Thomas evangelizes the sub-continent of India and plants the church there. Instead, we just put Thomas in a box and label it for all time as ‘doubting Thomas.’ It is a misnomer that discredits Thomas and distorts the point of the scripture.

Perhaps there are other ways to consider this passage. First and foremost, the subject of this text is Jesus, not Thomas. It is Jesus who meets the frightened and hidden disciples just exactly where they are – physically and spiritually. It is Jesus who proffers the gift of faith to all of the disciples, and it is Jesus who then also breathes on all of them, present or not, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus gives the disciples the gift of faith, and then empowers the disciples to put that faith into action. And by ‘disciples,’ we shouldn’t just hear the inner circle of twelve – now

eleven, without Judas. For the evangelist, John, the name ‘disciple’ includes any who follow Jesus, so there is no telling exactly who is in this room.

Secondly, for John, the writer of this Gospel, sin is theological, not moral or behavioral. In this Gospel, sin is to be blind to, or to not accept, the presence of God as revealed in Jesus the Christ. Sin becomes the opposite of faith, which is to believe in that presence. But what John tries to get us to see is that faith is a gift just waiting to be received by us, wherever we are, geographically, emotionally, intellectually or spiritually.

Faith is believing in something, or in this case, someone: Jesus. But again, for John, belief is not just intellectual assent to something. It is trust in one who is trustworthy or relying on something that is reliable. Mike Yaconelli, in his book, *Dangerous Wonder*, takes faith even one step further than belief. He writes that “Faith is more than believing; it is an act of courage, a bold grasping of God’s truth. Faith is a wrestling match with God, an intense struggle with truth in an attempt to squeeze every bit of knowledge out of it ... Jesus doesn’t criticize Thomas,” Yaconelli continues, “Jesus honors Thomas’ curiosity. Jesus legitimizes Thomas’ holy curiosity.”

While perhaps not everyone necessarily comes to faith with such a struggle, Thomas does seem to be one of us who does. Author and Biblical scholar, William Barclay, writes that Thomas possesses two great virtues. Thomas refuses to say that he understands what he clearly does *not* understand, and he refuses to say that he believes what he cannot *yet* bring himself to believe. Thomas is a man of integrity who knows that he cannot simply put a lid on his questions and uncertainties, and be done with it. Thomas knows they will not go away if he just ignores them. As Barclay puts it, Thomas is not the kind of person who would just rattle off a creed without knowing what it is all about. Thomas is someone who takes things apart in his mind and heart, studies them, and then tries to put the pieces back together in a way that makes sense to him. Barclay writes that there is more ultimate faith in someone who insists on being sure than in one who glibly repeats things never thought out. That kind of doubting, pondering, stewing, wrestling is the kind which ends up as the deepest faith.

Clearly, Jesus does honor and legitimize Thomas’ curiosity. Jesus affirms Thomas’ particular need for clarity and confirmation. Thomas never asks for anything more than the other disciples have already received. For the beloved disciple, an empty tomb is enough to bring about faith. For Mary Magdalene, it is simply one word: the sound of her own name on the lips of the gardener-turned-Jesus. For the other disciples present in the locked room when Thomas wasn’t there, it is the visual presence of Jesus. For Thomas, it is touch. Sight, sound, touch. Jesus meets each of the disciples – Jesus meets each of us – and honors and legitimizes what he knows we most need in order to believe. Jesus offers himself to everyone, in whatever way necessary, to move us from unbelief to belief. In other words, Jesus loves us just as we are, but loves us too much to leave us there. In the end, it is not the touching or the hearing or the seeing that matters, but rather the offering. The offering of the gift of self, the offering of the gift of faith.

What comes out of Thomas as a result of Jesus’ self-offering is the most powerful and complete confession of faith in all of the Gospel, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus quickly assures the disciples present – and every disciple for generations yet to come – that the gift of faith will always be available to anyone. It will not be limited to those who physically experience him. Which is awfully good news to us, 2000 years later. The revelation of God in the person of Jesus is not a captive to history, or space or time, but a present reality of existence for all. And that comes about by Jesus’ other gift – the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In John's Gospel, Easter and Pentecost are inextricably linked. The giving of the Holy Spirit occurs in that locked room on Easter Sunday evening. What we follow liturgically in the church is Luke's account in the book of Acts. But the point of both is the same – God – Jesus – does not leave us alone or abandon us, but gives us the comfort, the guidance, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. A Spirit that puts our faith to work so that others may see the faith we have and share in it. A Spirit that enables the revelation of God's presence in Jesus to continue through the witness of our lives. Through the gift of faith, through the gift of the Spirit, we are brought into partnership with God. We become co-creators, co-redemptors of this messy world. We become the resurrected body of Christ, nail-holes and all, in a wounded and suffering world. We become the bearers of faith and hope. We become the hands and heart, the feet and mouth of Jesus. We become the love that conquers all.

*Grasp my hands, Thomas,
and believe,
when you feel me in the world's pain, and in the world's glory.*

May we choose to accept the free gift of faith, and may we allow the Spirit to send us out to do the work we have been given to do – to feel and experience the world's pain and suffering and then to be the presence of Christ in this very messy world.

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