

Realities Old and New

John 20:24-31

2nd Sunday of Easter

David J. Lose

Luther Seminary, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Well, I can hardly believe it, but another Easter has come and gone. What a day; I miss it. For after forty days of preparing, I wish it would have lasted a little longer. But if I concentrate, it's not hard to recall, almost re-create, the sights and sounds of that day: the special music; the huge quantities of flowers; the liturgy, lessons, and hymns that make the day such a festive celebration.

But it's over. For those who had time off from work or school, it's back to the same old grind. For those who traveled to see family or friends, it's a long wait to the next holiday or vacation. And for those who were so involved in the special activities of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, it's time to settle back into a more regular schedule.

To put it simply: it's time to get back to normal; it's time to get back to work. Lent and Easter were a nice break from the norm, a nice change of pace, but it's time to get back to reality. And that can be hard, for the old routine is so...routine; and normalcy, reality, can be so crushingly unavoidable.

It comes from so many angles and catches us at unawares. For some, reality swoops in with unemployment or illness. For others, it sneaks in by running across the wedding photos of a ruined marriage. For others still, reality confronts them even as they leave the Easter celebration we were just reminiscing about and return home only to look across a tense dinner table, absent of joy, and realize that their family looks nothing like the Rockwell painting they try to envision for themselves most of the year.

Confrontations with normalcy—encounters with reality—they're hard to take because they destroy both the hopes and illusions on which we often rely. They hold up old goals and ideals to mock us and unfailingly remind us of our limitations. Ultimately, confrontations with the harshly normal, and normally harsh, realities of life remind us that there is an end—to dreams, to relationships, to life—an end over which we have no control and under which we feel as captured prisoners to a cruel and oppressive conqueror.

It is just this encounter with reality which today's gospel reading describes. And Thomas, in my opinion, has always gotten a bad rap. We know him as "the doubter." But I would contend that this passage of Scripture is *not* primarily about doubt; rather, it is about reality. For Thomas is, first and foremost, a realist. In John 14, when Jesus says mysteriously, "I go to prepare a place for you.... You know the way to the place where I am going," it is Thomas the pragmatist who replies truthfully, "Lord, we don't know where you are going; how can we know the way?" (14:5). And in the 11th chapter, when Jesus speaks of going back to Judea, Thomas knows that for Jesus to return to Jerusalem is to go to his death. Thomas was no fool. He counted the costs before making a decision. Nevertheless, it is he who bravely urges the others to follow Jesus: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (11:16).

In this light, Thomas' reaction to the news of the risen Christ should not be surprising. For he had been hardened and tempered by his experience in the world. He

was, above all else, a realist. And for Thomas, reality had come as never before, just days earlier in the form of a cross, when his master and friend had been crucified; when he had fled and deserted Jesus; when he realized that the hopes and expectations of the last three years were as dead as his beloved Lord.

It's not hard to imagine the bitter disappointment—in himself *and* in Jesus—which Thomas felt, for it's the same feeling each of us has when disappointed by reality, when we feel let down by ourselves and by God—by the loss of a job, the inability to conceive a child, the failure of a relationship, the death of a loved one.

Thomas had lost his Lord; he had witnessed the crucifixion of his Saviour! But he *had* survived that ordeal. In fact, sometimes I wonder if, while the other disciples were hiding in the upper room at Christ's first appearance, Thomas was not out preparing to move on, to get on with the work of rebuilding his shattered life. No wonder, then, that when his friends share their joyous news, "We have seen the Lord," he reacts skeptically.

It is as if an AIDS patient, finally reconciled to his fate, is told of a new miracle cure; or a disillusioned spouse, who has finally accepted that her marriage is over, is told that her husband is really a "new man." Nothing, you see, is worse than getting cut again by one's broken dreams, and Thomas has bled enough. So he demands proof: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Oddly, Thomas never does place his hands in his Lord's wounds, even though Jesus invites him to. No. Though most likely filled with the fear and anger and shame of knowing that he not only doubted but also deserted his friend, when Thomas is confronted by the risen Lord, when he is greeted by the forgiveness and grace embodied in the words "Peace be with you," he instantly believes and makes the great confession of John's gospel: "My Lord and my God!"

In a heartbeat, Thomas knows that he is in the presence of God, has been saved and redeemed by that God, and that he will never be the same. This story, then, is not about Thomas' doubt at all; rather, it is about an encounter with the grace of God which has come down from heaven and been embodied, enfleshed, in Jesus Christ.

It's important to note that at his encounter with the Risen Christ, Thomas' doubt is swept away—but not his realism. Thomas' confession is just as much a part of his pragmatism, his ability to accept reality, as was his demand for proof. For it is not Thomas' realism that has been changed, but reality itself. When he is confronted by God's grace in the Risen Christ, Thomas is confronted by a whole new reality.

Early in his magnificent novel *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo describes the fall, the actual moral disintegration, of Jean Valjean, a common laborer who is sentenced to five years in jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. The ravages of his time in prison, which is stretched from five to nineteen years, have, as Hugo describes, withered his soul. "Jean Valjean," he writes, "entered the galleys sobbing and trembling; he left hardened. He entered in despair; he left sullen." Once released, Valjean's descent continues, as no one will give him work or even sell him food or shelter because of his criminal record. Hopeless and exhausted, he stumbles into the house of an old bishop, who greets him courteously and treats him as an honored guest.

Valjean, though, ever the hardened realist, is confused by his host's generosity, and, unwilling to believe and unable to accept the genuineness of such treatment, he steals the silver plates from the bishop's cupboard and flees into the night. The next

day the police arrive at the bishop's house with the captured criminal and the silver. Valjean, naturally, is utterly dejected at the sure prospect of returning to prison.

Confronted by the man who returned his generosity with treachery, the bishop astonishes both the thief and his arresters: "I'm glad to see you," he says. "But I gave you the candlesticks, too, which are silver like the rest and would bring two hundred francs. Why didn't you take them along with your cutlery?"

As Hugo narrates, at the bishop's astounding words, "Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression no human tongue could describe." Forced to release their captive at the bishop's insistence, the police depart and the bishop hands Valjean the candlesticks, holding him just a moment longer before sending him freely on his way with this blessing: "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts...and I give it to God."

In the very next scene, Hugo describes Valjean's lengthy and pathetic weeping as he views the depths to which he has sunk and begins to comprehend the whole new world of forgiveness and grace into which he has been ushered. In that moment, Jean Valjean dies...and is reborn, and much of the rest of this long and turbulent novel is the story of the new reality which Valjean both lives and gives as a result of his encounter with transforming grace.

"Peace be with you," Christ says to the skeptical, frightened Thomas. "My friend," the bishop calls the hardened, unrepentant Valjean. Grace, mercy, comes in so many forms—in the unexpected apology of a colleague, the undeserved forgiveness of a sibling, the all too often unnoticed tenderness and fidelity of a spouse—but when it comes, it leaves the both the recipient and the giver transformed, for they have been joined, even at times unwittingly, to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

But though such mercy always transforms, it does not replace, the reality of this world. For in his encounter with grace, Jean Valjean, as with Thomas, is confronted not with opposition to his realism, but with a new reality altogether. Neither leaves his world. Valjean is still in oppressive and chaotic Paris, facing persecution and death. Thomas is still in Palestine, facing the same opposition which led to the death of his Lord. So, too, we are still in our often confusing and always ambiguous worlds.

But there is something different, something new. For what both Thomas and Valjean gain—what we gain!—is not an escape from the world, not a break from reality, but a sense, a conviction, that God's grace, God's new kingdom, has already intruded into and transformed the kingdom of this world, and nothing, not work, not school, not our relationships, not even life and death will ever be the same.

This is what Easter means—that we are forever transformed people. That is why we don't celebrate this Sunday as a Sunday *in* or *after* Easter, the way we would the 2nd Sunday in Advent or the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost. Rather, we call this day and the next five Sundays, a Sunday *of* Easter to remind us that Easter isn't just a day, it's every day. Easter isn't just a celebration, it's a way of life.

Easter is knowing that because we have been joined by Baptism to the Risen One, Jesus the Christ, we participate in his new reality and are, indeed, new creatures. Therefore, it is *we*, and not the oppressive realities of this life, who are, as Paul writes, in everything "more than conquerors through the One who loved us" (Rom 8:37).

For Christ is Risen! *He is risen indeed!* And *nothing* will ever be the same again. Thanks be to God.