

Easter Sermon

Romans 14, 15; John 20:19-31

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A small Bible church in the Bronx that ran a large daily soup kitchen in their basement, the Love Gospel Assembly, was in a shabby store-front in a nearly deserted neighborhood, crowded only with those who looked as if they could use a good meal and a welcoming place to eat it. Most of the volunteers who worked in the soup kitchen were church members—black men and women who were just a step or two on the socio-economic ladder above the guests they served. But it was clear they found much dignity in being able to serve those who were even less fortunate. “Look at this napkin,” said one man to us, teaching us the proper way to set a table. He held the white paper napkin up for us all to see. Having taken it from the ream of napkins as they’d been packaged, he said, “It’s all bent and wrinkled. Don’t use the ones that look like this.” He rummaged deeper into the pile and pulled out an unrumpled one. “Use the ones like this.” He set it down on the folding table that was covered with a vinyl cloth—one of 20 or so tables.

We were a youth group from my home church in New Hampshire where I was a seminarian. Leading this group on its annual mission trip, I’d managed to get everyone on the bus to New York, on the subway from Grand Central Station, off the subway at 103rd street, and two blocks north and one block east to the youth hostel where we’d camp out in one of their bunk rooms for a week. We were a tight-knit group—middle class white kids from a mainline church who all attended high school together, all came from “good” families and “good” homes. Oh, except for Joanne. She wasn’t a member of the youth group; she was a frequent skipper of school and would one day soon be a runaway from her troubled home; and she was here with us in New York because her mom had urged her, and I, as her long-ago babysitter and once across-the-street neighbor, had invited her. I admit to having a soft spot for this tall, awkward girl who had a loving but ineffective mother, a father who was long gone, a stepfather who was cruel, and a much younger half-sister who was a shining star. Joanne always seemed hell-bent on her own failure, leaving me sometimes to feel that I was the only one rooting for her. On our first evening in New York, while the boys in the group played pick-up basketball in the court across the street from the hostel and the girls sat on the hostel stoop watching people go by on Amsterdam Avenue, Joanne held fast to the payphone in the hallway across from our room—yelling at her mother for having made her come on this dorky trip, crying to her friends that she hated the people she was with, complaining to anyone she managed to reach that she wanted to come home. When she got off the phone, I told her I’d overheard her and offered her the chance to catch a bus home. But she said she’d stick it out; it was only a week. Whatever.

The other group of volunteers set its sights on Joanne as if she were prey—the weak one from the pack that would easily (and rightly) be winnowed away. From a more conservative church, they looked like us but seemed foreign in every other way. We all made some attempts at talking and getting along; we didn’t get very far. Only Joanne seemed to have much of an inter-action with them. I glanced up from my work

once to see a circle of them gathered around her, and a few minutes later she stormed out of the room. I followed to find her upstairs and outside, leaning against the crumbling building, smoking a cigarette and using language she didn't learn in Youth Group. The gist of her rage was this—they'd interrogated her about stuff she didn't know anything about, and then they mocked her for her not knowing what they meant, and then they called her "Thomas" as if they were calling her a really bad name. "Oooh, Thomas," she mocked their mocking, though it clearly had hurt. "They said a bad word!" They were stupid. They were dorks. But they'd also caught her off guard and left her with no comeback. She spit out the words, "Why were they calling me Thomas?" Why were they calling Joanne Thomas? Were they implying she looked, or seemed, like a boy? Was Thomas slang for something awful where they came from? It was an insult, clearly.

Thomas, of course, is the disciple known for his doubt. That's what we've been told, anyway. As if a puppet in a piety play about bad and good, right and wrong, saved and damned, Thomas is the one who doubted while the rest believed. And so we've learned the lesson that we shouldn't be like Thomas, that indeed to be like Thomas is to be bad and wrong or at least not to be blessed as those who have not seen and yet come to believe, that even to be called "Thomas" is to be judged and mocked and condemned—chased out, cast out, crucified...?

Thomas, though, we might also remember, left his life behind to follow Jesus as he wandered around Judea with no apparent purpose or point. Compelled, he must have been, by faith that this Jesus was someone worth following, though not for any obvious reasons, that this Jesus had authority, though not earned through any of the usual channels, that this man from Nazareth was also of God, was perhaps even His Messiah, Thomas spent three years walking with Jesus wherever he went, listening to Jesus whenever he preached, witnessing Jesus work (even on the Sabbath), all of which was to sense love in action—how it attracts and transforms all who are near. Thomas, a doubter? I doubt it.

What's more, Thomas endured the confusing and then terrifying events in Jerusalem that led up to the crucifixion of Jesus and two other outlaws. And while the sky darkened and the streets emptied and the crowd once taken up by bloodlust ("Crucify him!" they had cried all together in a wonderful and frightening unison, "Crucify him!") was now dispersed in fear ("What have we done?" someone somewhere might have wondered), and the disciples—betrayers and deniers and abandoners all, keepers of silence when any of theirs might have been the voice to calm the stormy sea or to turn the tide that was moving unchecked toward violence or to quell the rising need for catharsis—hid themselves behind locked doors in that upper room, where the bread that Jesus had broken a few nights earlier might still be on the table, where the cup that Jesus had poured that last night when they were all together might still be sitting ready to be shared again, locked away all for fear that this sacrifice might not have brought about catharsis and then calm, but that the authorities and the whole city might need another and another and another and another such that Peter and Thomas and James and John and the rest needed to fear the crowd, and such that those unnamed people in the crowd who had all demanded a crucifixion needed to fear Peter and Thomas and James and John and the rest, and such that Peter and Thomas and James and John and the rest needed to fear one another, for hadn't each of them betrayed and denied and abandoned Jesus in his hour of need so that each was worthy of the blame

of the others, of the punishment of the others? Accusation was on the loose; it was accuse or be accused. Death, it seemed, was winning the day; it was kill or be killed.

And when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." And he showed them his hands and his side, and as the disciples rejoiced, he said again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." This was no mere greeting: "Peace, man." This was no mere wishing them well: "May you find peace." This was a commissioning; this was a command: "Peace be with you. As God sent me, so I send you." They would find themselves, as Jesus did, among those who would betray and deny and abandon and kill, and they were to bring peace—an end to the accusing, an end to the scapegoating, an end to the bloodlust that would justify itself by seeing to the suffering of the guilty and swearing by the guilt of those who suffer, an end to the works of religious sacrifice that would bring about catharsis that would bring about calm at least for a time, an end to the vicious cycle whose only end is a dead end. "Peace be with you," Jesus said. And then he breathed on them, as God breathed into humankind in the beginning. And then he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And all the disciples did receive this Holy Spirit who is the *paraclete*, the advocate, this one who stands with and within a person who is being pinned with blame, this spirit who speaks for one who is nailed with blame. The disciples saw and touched and received from the Resurrected Christ.

Oh, except for Thomas, who apparently was out—the only one of the disciples not locked away in fear, the only one of the disciples on that third evening after the crucifixion not hiding out in the upper room. And what he was doing we don't know, but it may well have been that he was getting food and water to sustain the disciples during their indefinite stay behind those bolted doors. Or it might have been that he was sending word to loved ones that they were all right, though hidden away yet safe, not missing, not dead. Or it might have been that he was like the dove was to Noah and all the creatures on the ark—sent forth to find out if the violent sea had settled back into calm and safe waters. Whatever it was, I doubt it was a matter of Thomas's so-called doubt getting the better of him—bailing out on the disciples now, after all that had already happened. Whatever it was, I doubt it was a matter of his being doubtful at all. It seems, rather, that he was simply unlucky, cursed with a case of unbelievably bad timing.

Imagine him coming through the door. He'd have had to knock, of course, and even to have called out to the ten who were hidden inside, raising his voice so they could hear that it really was him and so it was safe for them to unlock the doors. Imagine him walking into the room. He'd have had food, maybe, and drink for his friends, and perhaps offered assurance that the city had settled back into the usual cautious calm. Imagine him as his friends told him, excitedly, "We have seen the Lord." Imagine him using language perhaps that he wouldn't have learned in Youth Group. Or imagine him simply saying what the story remembers him to have said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

We hear this story every year on the Sunday after Easter. I've preached on this series of events several times now. Here's what strikes me this time around: that Thomas doesn't seem to doubt that they saw Jesus. If he did doubt that, he would likely have said, "Unless I see his face and hear his voice for myself, I won't believe." No,

he doesn't seem to doubt the reality of the Resurrection. He seems to doubt that Jesus who is the Messiah of God and who was alive last week and is alive now still, or again, was crucified. "Unless I see the mark of the nails and in his hand...." He seems to doubt the reality of the crucifixion—that God's Son, who was to come in glory, who was to come in awesome power and might, would fall to being the scapegoat of a people who had been waiting for him, waiting for him, waiting for him to rescue them. If Thomas doubts anything at all, he doubts that God's anointed one would suffer crucifixion.

And, you know, I think people still doubt this. Whenever we hear of God acting in wrath to avenge his enemies, we hear doubt that Jesus took on the cross. Whenever we imply that God is at work in making rich people rich and poor people poor—the Prosperity Gospel that casts the wealthy as deserving their wealth and the poor as deserving their destitution—we reveal our doubt that God's son took on the cross. Whenever we speak of God conforming to the value system that we live by in the world, we confess a doubt that God Himself suffered that we might be saved from systems that thrive on the belief that human suffering is divinely ordained. Such doubt in Christ crucified sounds like this, "Blessed are the aggressors, for they will inherit the earth," but belief sounds like this, "Blessed are the meek...." Doubt in the cross of Christ sounds like this, "Blessed are the power-mongers, for they will be called children of God," but belief sounds like this, "Blessed are the peacemakers...." Doubt that God would come not from on high in power and might but from below in vulnerability and compassion sounds like this, "Blessed are the strong in faith, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," but belief that God would come to us not from on high in power and might but from below in vulnerability and compassion sounds like this, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." If Thomas doubts anything, he doubts the crucifixion. And if Thomas is to be used to teach us anything, it's that we should, like him, come to believe in the crucifixion, for it is such a God who takes on our human compulsion to crucify and yet rises to life anew that truly has the power to save us—from ourselves, from one another, and from the gods we have created in our image.

The funny thing about those kids insulting Joanne by calling her Thomas is that they were right on one account. Joanne is like Thomas, unlucky to the point where she seems almost cursed, yet in that, like the meek and the peacemakers, somehow blessed. So, on this account those kids were wrong: to be likened to Thomas isn't an insult; it's practically a confession of faith in the true God who we crucified and yet who lives and comes to us in forgiveness to offer us such life. I don't know if Joanne has ever come consciously to know this God. I do know that if she has, it's no thanks to the Youth Groups she happened across that day. What's more, I'd guess it's no thanks to me, as I didn't offer her much in the way of support, just an allowance to finish that cigarette alone. Suffice it to say, the church in its incarnation that morning in that nearly abandoned neighborhood wasn't quite living up to its calling—feeding the poor, yes, but turning the poor in spirit back out to the street. But, this too I know—that God does know and love Joanne, as God does know and love each of us. And, this too I know—that God does come to us as we need Him to, whether we ask in language we learned in Youth Group or in language we learned on the streets, breaking in to our world and our lives that we might know ourselves as he does, children of God.