

Sermon, 2nd Sunday of Easter
April 28, 2019
Shepherd by the Sea Episcopal-Lutheran Church
Pastor Vernon Holmes

When I was last with you, we saw the Father's love through the 'Hands of the father' painted in Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*. We saw that the real story of the prodigal son was not the younger son's return, nor even the elder's son's recalcitrance. The real story was the love within the Father's heart. A love revealed in the Father's voice as he welcomed the younger son back home and bid his servants prepare a feast, and as he bid the elder son to come in to the feast and join the celebration. A love revealed in the Father's hands as he embraced the younger son. Today, we move from the Father's hands, to the Son's hands.

Easter is all about signs...At the conclusion of today's Gospel lesson we hear these words:

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Signs are metaphors. They point to something beyond themselves to something larger, grander, more meaningful and more powerful than the single event. Saying that these Easter stories are signs is to say that their metaphorical meaning has a surplus of meaning a more than literal meaning. A richer, fuller, symbolic meaning that transcends time and space. So that the depth of these stories are not found in the past, once upon a time, long long ago ... the power and meaning of these stories are about the here and now!

So Jesus did many other signs, but these signs, these particular signs are written so that you may come to believe and that you may find life in his name. So the Easter question is, **"Can you read the signs?"**

The earlier signs in John's Gospel were all about Mary, Peter and the beloved disciple. Peter couldn't read the signs, he couldn't understand, he could not believe....but the beloved disciple did! The one whom Jesus loved, he saw, and he believed. Mary had several signs but she could not read them, could not believe them until Jesus called her name. Then she saw.... then she believed. Then **she** was sent to proclaim. Mary's sign, which she heard in the calling of her name, was also a sign given for us. A sign

that says Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and Jesus' sheep hear his voice, and follow his way.

Just as Mary was sent to bear witness, so are the sheep. That is, those who hear his voice and follow the Good Shepherd, are sent as signs into this world proclaiming that Christ is alive. You and I, baptized and called by name, you and I, holy and redeemed, are the signs given to the world so that they also might believe that Christ is alive! And that through believing, they might have life in his name.

At the end of Chapter 20, after Mary discovers the empty tomb, and after Peter and John visit the tomb, and after Jesus calls Mary her by name, we have yet another Easter story. This one on Easter eve. It is a story about the difficulty of belief. It is usually called the story of Doubting Thomas. Like the prodigal son, this story is misnamed and identified. On the surface, that is from a more literal reading, this story seems rather straight forward and factual. Thomas does not believe the report that they have seen the Lord. And its not hard for us to identify with Thomas. In the face of the claims of Easter, Thomas strikes us as being very down to earth and real. So where is the metaphor? Where is the sign.

In today's Gospel text that impossibility of believing is front and center in the story of Thomas. Thomas is saying to the verbal testimony of the disciples and the women, "I'm doubting it!"

"I'm doubting it." But I think that what Thomas was doubting was much deeper than simply the appearance of a resuscitated body. I think Thomas was doubting the whole package which Jesus taught and proclaimed. That life comes from or through the cross. That abundant life, meaningful life, which Jesus came to reveal, is a life found by dying to self and living for others. That healing comes through being present with others in their pain. That wholeness begins by giving up selfishness and exchanging it for the care of others. I think that is what Thomas was doubting!

Thomas is doubting that the way of Jesus is the way to life abundant. Under the words, lay the experience! Thomas is saying "I watched Jesus live that out and look what it got him! All of his love for others, all his compassion for the weak, all of his care for the least of these, ...**look what it got him.** It got him hung on a Roman cross. What Thomas was struggling with was the myth of **redemptive violence.** That it was through violence and power that one established the kingdom. It didn't matter how good you were, it didn't matter how compassionate you were, power and might is what delivers the kingdom. And if you interfered with Rome's way you were a trouble maker and you would be dealt with like a trouble maker.

You cannot challenge the status quo without the architects of the status quo responding with power and might — just ask Martin Luther King Jr. You cannot challenge the inequalities of wealth without the oligarches finding a way to silence you — ask Oscar Romero about that. Jesus got in the way, and Jesus was killed. It was as simple and obvious as that. Jesus was no match for Rome. Rome won! Jesus lost! Caesar, after all, was the *“sotair tou cosmou”* the savior of the world. Thomas saw that violence and force and power ruled. He saw it win out over nonviolence, compassion and servanthood. He saw the way of the world win out over the way of Jesus. The way of the world won! No wonder Thomas was doubting Jesus’ way.

Jesus said: *“whoever wants to be the greatest in the Kingdom of God must be the least”*
And Thomas said *I’m doubting it.*

Jesus said: *“Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*
And Thomas said ***I’m doubting it.***

Jesus said: *“do not return evil for evil, but pray for those who persecute you turn the other cheek go the second mile you cannot serve both God and mammon the first shall be last and the last shall be first”* And Thomas said ***I’m doubting it.***

Jesus called the disciples and said to them, *“You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”*
And Thomas said ***I’m doubting it.***

Jesus said: *“whoever seeks to save their life will lose it, whoever loses their life for my sake and for the Gospel will save it*” And Thomas said ***I’m doubting it.***

So Thomas is saying to the disciples who claim to have seen the Lord, “I’m doubting it!” I’m doubting it unless I actually see that this Jesus whom you claim to have seen, is indeed the one who was crucified. **Crucified and Resurrected.** I want see the wounds. And unless I see the wounds, and unless I place my finger in the nail prints, and my hand in his side, I’m doubting it! This story is about the wounds of Christ—they are the sings for the world - not Thomas’s doubting.

Thomas is saying: “Oh it might be well and good to be compassionate and love your neighbor , it may even be a noble thing to live your life in such a way in resistance to the ways of this world, but make no mistake about it. If that is the path that you choose to walk, it is the gallows for you. No one who challenges the status quo can win!

Now here's the point, if the visions and experience of the risen Jesus were simply pre-crucifixion images there is no way that such a vision undoes the world's no! If it is simply a vision of Jesus remembered as a good man, a beloved teacher, a sage and a healer of untold renown, then it does nothing to dissuade Thomas of his belief that law and order, power and might, embodied in Rome and in Caesar, finally won the day. Jesus was killed, story over, game set and match!

But if it is an appearance of Christ **Crucified** that's a different story! That holds out the possibility that Caesar did not win. And that the world's no was not the final word. That God's affirmation of Jesus life, teachings, and message, God's yes to the way of Jesus is more powerful than Caesar's no and renunciation of them. Show me the wounds, show me the evidence that evil, and the way of world, did not ultimately triumph over Jesus's way of distributive justice, righteousness and compassion.

This is why the apostle Paul says we preach Christ crucified! It's not simply that we preach Christ. No, we preach Christ Crucified and risen! We preach the way of the cross....the way of Jesus!

It's not simply Jesus, raised from the dead, but that Jesus **crucified and buried**, was raised. That is why Thomas says "unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and his feet, and unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Believe what? That God could raise him up? No! Believe that the way Jesus proclaimed, the way Jesus lived, the way Jesus taught is actually the way to life, and to God That is why Thomas is struggling to believe and why he requires to see the proof of the wounds in order to believe that Rome's way is not **the** way.

And the world, like Thomas is saying to us: I'm doubting it. Unless I see the wounds, I'm doubting it.

Are you and I signs of the way of Jesus? Do we bear the marks of dying to self? Do we bear the wounds of following the way of Jesus Crucified and risen?

We can proclaim the resurrection until hell freezes over, but if there is no evidence that we actually follow the way of the cross, then the world like Thomas is saying "I'm doubting it!"

But if our testimony, if our witness is to the crucified one, if our lives bear the marks of following that way... Then, and only then, are we signs of the kingdom come. Signs which the world can see and which the world can believe!

Jesus the crucified one is alive. Our gospel is Christ crucified and risen! And Jesus is saying to us: *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*"

And the world is saying to us: *Unless I see in you, the mark of the nails in your hands, and the wound in your side, I will not believe.*”

In a way, Jesus words to Thomas were an exercise in trust, an experiment in truth. Thomas, come and see. Come and embrace the wounds of discipleship and experience that the way of Jesus is victorious. ... and that the world’s way is not.

They are also an invitation to us. They are an invitation to engage in discipleship, to embrace the way of servanthood, to experience the wounds of the cross, of dying to self and losing one’s life for the sake of the gospel, and in the process experience the power of God to transform us, and to raise us up to new life **here and now**...So that, we may participate with Christ in the redemption of the world.

This is why St. Paul says in Romans “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

And as you walk in the way of the cross, Jesus gives you as a sign to the world that they may believe, and that believing they too might have life in his name.

Amen.