

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20.25)

There is a startling intimacy to Thomas’s demand. This is an unsettling image, dependent upon all fleshliness. I want to put my hand in his side. That place where flesh was broken apart—I want to touch that wound; and I want to feel its healing. And then I’ll believe.

Last month I watched another Thomas, this time a doctor, touch such a wound—placing his hand inside a young man’s side, which had been pierced by a bullet. No water flowed from his side, no bitter vinegar to quench his thirst, no moment to look upon his mother and bid her safe-keeping.

Only a cold metallic tomb for this son; this broken body was not made whole, not brought back to life.

Working as the on-call chaplain in New Haven, I have seen all the woundedness any Thomas could want to touch and seldom, when I am called to the E.R., is there healing to be seen and my heart made to believe.

“Peace be with you,” Jesus tells his disciples. (John 20.19b)

While Jeremiah cries out, “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace’, when there is no peace.” (Jeremiah 8.11)

This morning, this Easter season, we celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord and the new life that such transformation brings. But let us not lose sight of the meaning of Jesus’ Resurrection. Jesus was not brought back to the disciples in some spiritual realm, with some immaterial significance. In fact, the gospel of John is clear to make this point as Jesus comes in all flesh, in all sameness, only this time, with scarred hands and side.

In a radical way, the Jesus who comes to visit the disciples is materially continuous with that rabbi and friend of the days of their shared ministry. This is the significance of the empty tomb for John—it is the same fleshly Jesus. And so, it is clear for the disciples that the good news has not come to an end. The good news that Jesus proclaimed is not an abstraction or a concept even though Jesus dies a physical death. Instead, the power of the Good news is made real by the presence of Jesus—in all flesh and materiality.

And this is the paradox of the Christian faith—of following Christ: the Good News, the Easter Gospel, is not known in some interior, individual spirituality; rather, the reality, the presence of Jesus Christ is seen, touched, felt, and believed in a material world through a historical community—the community of believers.

The truth of the Easter Gospel is inseparable from the community of believers. For this reason, we see Jesus making himself known in a regular, mundane home, where the disciples are gathered together. With the door shut, the wagons rounded up, Jesus comes to proclaim peace and the injunction: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And with this, all doors are to be burst open, all deadbolts unhinged—an explosion from within the Christian community.

But this is not what happens in John’s Gospel.

Thomas was not there to see the resurrected Jesus. No worry, one might think, the others will tell him and his heart will leap with joy and he too, will be transformed. But this is not the case. Thomas does not believe the words of the others. He demands Jesus to return and only then will he believe the truth of their testimony.

It is precisely against this individuation of belief that John presents this interaction between Thomas, Jesus, and the others. That the witness of the other disciples is not enough for Thomas is, in John’s eyes, the great tragedy. It is not his doubt in the Resurrection, but his disbelief in the witness and testimony of the other disciples that moves John to write.

In a radical stance, especially to our modern minds, John argues that all belief and truth are found in the life of a community—the Gospel of John itself, as a text, is “written so that you may come to believe...”

And it is exactly in this reality that the truth of the Resurrection is found, not in the depths of personal belief or piety, but the testimony, the witness of the community of believers to the Risen Lord.

This is made perfectly clear in our reading from Acts. Luke describes the Church in Jerusalem as being of one heart and soul, where possessions were shared, and generosity and charity defined Christian social relations. As to the validity of this description, there are many voices in this debate; what is not debatable is the connection the early Christians saw between their actions and their belief in the resurrection of Jesus. “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus...”

The very truth of this testimony is rooted in their charitable actions—their lives of gifted-ness and generosity. We see in their witness a sure foundation for the truth of the Easter Gospel: lives lived in Christian love—even sacrificial love. It is through their witness and testimony to the Risen Lord, so many years ago, that today we find a new invitation to believe. Our lives as testimony are this invitation to the world to see, touch, and believe.

Rowan Williams makes clear that what Thomas is being invited to believe in, is that which every person in this Church, every person we shall ever meet, is invited to believe in: The Riseness of the crucified Jesus. And like Thomas, we ourselves, and certainly those outside the walls of this sanctuary, desire some form of assurance, even individual assurance that this is true—that there is new life in this resurrected Jesus. Moreover, we often find that we want more than the witness and testimony of other believers, but this is not to be.

Luke is as clear as is John on this point—the truth of the Easter Gospel, the truth of the Christian faith, the truth of our very lives, is inseparable from our actions, the testimony offered by the manner of our living.

So let us not concede that the vision of the early Church in Jerusalem is mere embellishment or unattainable idealism. Neither let us think that a world who defines the Church as fundamentally anti-gay and lesbian, hypocritical and judgmental, uncaring and old-fashioned, superstitious, irrational, and unacceptably exclusionary is in little need of the presence and peace of Christ.

Instead, we must examine our own actions and witness as a community of believers.

We come to the truth that our lives, especially our life together as a community following after the call of the Risen Lord, are the testimony of the truth of the Gospel—the Easter Gospel.

Rowan Williams argues that at Christmas, in the Word made Flesh, we are shown that human flesh is capable of communicating the divine. If this is so, our celebration of Easter faith is nothing more than our continued testimony to the truth that it is in the transformation and healing of human flesh—of this world—that we can come to the full knowledge of all truth, which is the fullness of God.

Therefore, let us continue to be transformed as a community, as those who claim to follow Jesus as our Lord and God. A God who invites us to believe and act, so that others might see and believe. To touch and be touched by the woundedness of our flesh, of our humanity, in the hopes of healing. Sisters and Brothers, in our witness to the Risen Lord, we are assured that we too hold a part in the healing of this world, but more deeply, we are invited to believe and testify that our flesh, like that of the Risen Jesus, is able to not only heal and be healed, but, in the end, show God to a broken and battered world.