

Second Sunday of Easter

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Jesus has been appearing to his disciples in the post resurrection stories found in John's gospel. And without fail, the second Sunday of Easter is always about "doubting" Thomas. The one who didn't believe. But if we are fair to the characters who meet Jesus, they all need help in understanding that it is Jesus who is with them. Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener until he says her name. Jesus had to show his disciples his hands and his side when he appeared among his friends behind locked doors that evening. And poor Thomas, who wasn't there at the time, demands proof: the same evidence his friends received. And he doesn't simply doubt, Thomas doesn't believe. Full stop. For Thomas, Jesus is gone, and their mission has ended with him. And because of this, we have condemned Thomas for not believing. But we have been wrong in doing this and Jesus certainly doesn't condemn Thomas for his needing help in believing. Rather than judgement, Jesus invites Thomas to come close, to observe the wounds in his hands, to place his own in Jesus' side. Jesus doesn't push Thomas away, he invites him to come closer, just as Jesus has come closer to Thomas. And when he sees Jesus and sees the wounds, Thomas exclaims: My Lord and my God! The clearest testimony to Jesus' identity in the gospels.

In this moment between savior and redeemed, Thomas moves from his unbelief, moves from his own personal darkness full of grief and loss, into the light and into a new understand of Jesus, into a new relationship with Jesus. Jesus is changed by the resurrection, but so is Thomas. And what all of Jesus' beloveds come to in seeing his resurrected self, is seeing him. It is as if Mary's eyes are opened when

Jesus speaks her name in the garden. Jesus shows his disciples his wounds in order for them to recognize the risen Jesus. He may be there with them, but it is Jesus who moves first in order for his friends to see and to know him, the one they had been looking for among the dead. Because I imagine that recognizing Jesus, once thought dead but who now is seen as being among the living in a way they cannot understand or explain, would require an entire shift of understanding. I imagine that something within Mary and the other disciples changed in order for them to really see Jesus. That the world they thought they lived in, didn't really exist at all and instead they found themselves in another one entirely, one where God in Christ walks as a mortal, dies like a mortal, but in the end cannot be kept away from God's children, God's creation, God's friends. In their recognition of Jesus, as we see with Thomas, everything changes.

As we were discussing in bible study this past week, it is Jesus' wounds that so often make him recognizable. That the Jesus his disciples see is a wounded Jesus. A Jesus who has known suffering, abandonment, humiliation, and finally death through his experience with the cross. This is a Jesus who has been destroyed by the state like a common criminal. I think it matters that Jesus' disciples and we see Jesus in this way. That we see the wounds....see a body that has been broken. When we break the bread each Sunday, when we hear that crack the bread makes as it is broken in two, we remember the breaking of Jesus body, even as we celebrate it being re-membered in those of us gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. But there is also a temptation for us to forget Jesus wounds and remember only the resurrection, only the triumph of his being alive again. And sometimes, it goes beyond even that.

One well-known yet controversial pastor who has likened Jesus to a prize fighter: tough, strong, tattooed, masculine, willing to beat up his enemies.¹ We may find this silly, amusing even, but it is a dangerous vision of Jesus and one very different from the vulnerable Jesus who died on the cross. This is a kind of vision of Jesus made in our own image, a Jesus on whom we project our own need for control, for power, for justification, a Jesus we can employ as a kind of weapon to get our own way, spiritual or otherwise. This is a Jesus of those who have power, and who see God as an extension of that power. This is the Jesus of tyrants, of kings and kingdoms seeking to legitimize their rule, their rightness, their unchallenged privilege. Certainly in our own context we have heard language conflating God's will and war that the wars we wage are waged for God out of God's will. But what this really is, is an image of Jesus without the cross. And as such it is a distortion.

But when we remember Jesus the crucified, when we recognize his wounded body, we meet the Jesus of those who suffer, the God of those who are marginalized, we see a man who stands in the place of those who are crushed by the unholy actions of a fallen humanity. He takes their place in the prison, in the death camp, on the lynching tree. And in the resurrection, instead of returning and destroying us, punishing us, we meet a Jesus who holds in his very self the evidence of our violent and broken humanity, a humanity that destroys the weak, murders those deemed unworthy, and ends the innocent; he returns to that same humanity to show us what we have done, and in the same moment invites us to join him not just in death on the cross, but also in new life in the kingdom. As the late theologian James Cone writes: "The real scandal of the gospel is this: humanity's salvation is revealed in the cross of the condemned criminal Jesus, and humanity's salvation is

¹ Mark Driscoll:

https://web.archive.org/web/20071013102203/http://relevantmagazine.com/god_article.php?id=7418

available only through our solidarity with the crucified people in our midst.”² It is on the cross and in the people who are victimized on all the crosses of the world that we will see Jesus. In his resurrection, Jesus shows us the cross is not the end but a gateway into an utterly new world of being and understanding.

In the garden, Jesus asks Mary: Whom are you looking for? This is a question for all of us: Who are we looking for when we seek Jesus? Will we know when we meet Jesus? Will we recognize him? Will we linger long enough to let Jesus reveal himself to us? Because as we’ve learned in John’s gospel, one can see and not believe, hear but not understand. Faith is a matter of the heart. It is a relationship with our Savior who is revealing himself to us all the time, just as he did to Mary, just as he did for the other disciples. Jesus is in front of us every day, and all around us, calling to us to see him, showing us his wounds. May we have not just the faith to recognize him, but also the courage and love to touch his hands, place our hands in his side and follow him wherever he leads us.

² James H. Cone. The Cross and the Lynching Tree. Pg 160