

Seeing with the eyes of faith*Easter 2C 3 April 2016 / John 20:19-end*

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Alleluia! Christ is risen! What none of the Gospels tell us, in all their varying accounts, is where the male disciples were when Jesus was crucified. We know the disciple whom Jesus loved was with the women at the foot of the cross, and that Judas hung himself soon after handing Jesus over to the authorities. We know too that when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane the disciples fled in terror – all except Peter, who followed at a distance and then denied him for fear of exposure. But that's it. No word of what they did next. I wonder if some tried to blend into the crowd and watch the crucifixion from a distance, but I suspect they stayed away out of fear. Fear of watching that terrible death, but mostly fear of being captured and meeting the same gruesome end. I can well imagine them scattering as they fled; thinking it best not to be seen together. Yet how they must have needed one another at such a frightening time.

When we pick up the story in John's Gospel today, they are gathered together behind locked doors. Eleven men still desperately trying to come to terms with the turn of events they never expected. For three days they've been together, sometimes sitting in stunned silence, sometimes talking in twos and threes, in hushed tones, reliant perhaps on the women to give them some idea of what's going on outside, to judge the political temperature, to report back the word on the streets. They're shocked, scared and scarred. The unthinkable has happened; the future they risked everything for has suddenly imploded in the worst way imaginable; the man they'd left everything to follow has been captured and killed without putting up any resistance. And now they may be next. It's like a waking nightmare. Perhaps the women have been bringing them supplies, or maybe they've dared to go out to fetch provisions, in ones or twos, maybe disguised for fear of being recognised; after all, Peter had a close call back in that courtyard. Maybe it's Thomas' turn this night, the evening of the first day of the week. Or maybe he's simply had enough of being cooped up in the pressure cooker atmosphere and against their advice, has ducked out into the shadows, needing space and fresh air.

It's certainly been a strange day, and there's been another unexpected and inexplicable turn of events.

Mary Magdalene arrived this morning in a terrible state, saying someone had taken the body. There was nothing for it, but for some of them to check. Peter and the beloved disciple had volunteered and had run all the way there and back. Sure enough, Mary was right, but as to what was going on – whether it was the authorities or some of the others who'd followed Jesus when he was alive, well, there was no telling. Mary had come back later saying she'd seen him, but, well, that was impossible, surely? Wishful thinking. He was dead, of that much the women had been sure, on that terrible afternoon not three days before. He'd raised Lazarus that one time, but how could he raise himself once he was dead? He couldn't, simple. And yet, what was going on? Maybe it was a plot by the authorities to smoke them out. Best stay put and hope Thomas would get back soon. Wait, maybe, that's where Thomas has gone; knowing him, he just might have ventured to the empty tomb, wanting to see for himself.

That's when it happens, out of nowhere. Suddenly he's there, Jesus, right in their midst. Almost as if the last 3 days have been a bad dream, and yet . . . and yet they can see the scars. Stunned faces convey fleeting flashes of fear. A ghost? Seeking vengeance? But then he speaks and immediately they realise the absurdity of their over-wound, over-active imaginations. "Peace" he says. No accusations or recriminations, but simply "Peace be with you." And then it's back to business. He still wants, still needs them. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Up till now they've been holding their breath, collectively, unconsciously. It's only when he speaks those words of commissioning that they realise, and, as one, exhale.

And then he exhales, breathes on them, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." He's breathing new life into them; his Spirit is enlivening their spirits – it's like the Garden of Eden and the valley of dry bones all rolled into one. And then he's gone, as quickly and as mysteriously as he came.

They're so excited when Thomas finally does reappear, they don't even ask where's he's been.

They simply erupt with the news. “We have seen the Lord.” His face changes, but is impossible to read – wonder or disbelief? Somewhere between the two. He clearly, desperately *wants* to believe, but what they’re telling him is so huge. “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.”

It doesn’t seem such an unreasonable request in the circumstances – to want the same experience they’ve had. After all, they didn’t believe Mary until they’d seen for themselves, and no one likes to miss out, especially on something as earth-shattering as this. It seems unfair that Thomas, headstrong and unfailingly honest, has been called “Doubting” ever since. But Nancy Claire Pittman suggests it’s not his refusal to believe in the resurrection that is the fault, but rather, it’s his rebuttal of the friends he’s spent so much of his life with. She explains, “Thomas abrogates the work of Christ in their midst through his proud words of doubt. *Their* eyes and *their* fingers are not enough for him; he must see and touch for *himself*. Thus the community Jesus has tried so hard to build throughout the Gospel is threatened from the beginning by Thomas’ scepticism.”¹

But Jesus is neither phased nor offended by Thomas’s earnest desire to believe, and reappears a week later in the same way, with the same greeting, this time when Thomas is also among the disciples. He invites Thomas to enter into exactly the proof he required – to see and touch his wounds. There is no evidence in the text to confirm whether or not Thomas did touch Jesus, but it may well be that seeing is enough, for John simply tells us, Thomas answered, “My Lord and my God!” And so he who has been dubbed ‘doubting’ is the first to recognise in the risen Christ, the God who created Heaven and Earth. His earnest and heartfelt struggle to believe is rewarded with knowledge and recognition beyond that of the other disciples, including Mary.

I find it immensely reassuring in the face of a story, an event, of such magnitude, to learn, as John is clear in telling us, of the very human reactions to the resurrection; of Mary mistaking the risen Christ for the gardener, of Thomas somehow managing to miss the first appearance to the disciples and his ensuing days of waiting, wondering, hoping and longing.

I have a huge amount of empathy for Thomas, and the seeds of faith at the heart of the doubt he dared to voice, and wholeheartedly agree with David Henson’s

observation: “he waited in the darkness of his own unbelief for the ghost of God to reappear and breath on him, too. This, to me, is more difficult and more courageous than the simple act of believing. That Thomas waits, while disbelieving, is the very definition of faithfulness, if not faith itself. “

As we continue to celebrate this joyful season of Easter, we share in the commission given to those first disciples. We too share in the gift of God’s Spirit to enliven and inspire us. As we celebrate the reality of the resurrection and its impact in our lives and faith, so too we must face the responsibilities and challenges it presents. The commission the risen Christ gave the early disciples was first to receive the Holy Spirit. For us today, this opportunity comes by way of our baptism and confirmation – as those among us who shared in these sacraments last week at the cathedral can attest – and also in our sharing of the Eucharist.

Jesus also encouraged those first disciples to forgive in God’s name. For many of us, that can be a big ask. Over the years I’ve come to the conclusion that by and large, the two biggest struggles in the Christian journey are forgiveness and prayer. Forgiveness is something with which many of us struggle on a daily basis. I suspect for many of us, we find forgiveness a bigger challenge than resurrection. We know that Christ gave up his life on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and we affirm this each week in the Eucharist, but forgiveness can still demand of us more than we are prepared - or think we are able - to give.

When we find ourselves in that place of doubt – *can I really forgive?* – then let’s look to Thomas, whose resistance, persistence and sincere struggle to believe was finally met in finding himself face to face with the God who loves us beyond our imagining. It is a life-changing moment of immense joy and liberation.

John is clear that there were many other signs Jesus did in the presence of the disciples. We live long, long after those who saw the risen Christ with their own eyes, but we see, with the eyes of faith, signs of God at work through the Spirit in our own lives, the lives of others and in our world. May we be blessed with moments in which we too can say and share, in our day and age, "My Lord and my God!"

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Lindsay Meader