

"My Lord and my God"

*A sermon by Madeleine Harris-Lerew, Seminarian
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

EASTER 2: APRIL 16, 2023

ACTS 2:14a, 22-32 | PSALM 16 | 1 PETER 1: 3-9 | JOHN 20:19-31

In the name of the triune God who gives himself for us over and over so that we might give ourselves to one another. Amen.

The story of Jesus' appearance to Thomas is often interpreted as an example of who we are *not* to be - the Christian with doubts. The one who didn't believe immediately. The one who didn't know what belief meant. The implied lesson being that it might be more blessed to be one of those who did not need to see in order to believe.

After all, no one can see the wind - you only feel it and see its effect on other things. No one can see the heat of a summer day, and yet we believe in it because of the way it feels on our bodies. And isn't God much more like these things, than a tidal wave that you can see coming for miles and miles. Perhaps.

But the thing that we know about metaphor, or about religious truth in general, is that it functions as a kind of prism in the light, and depending on the way that it's tilted - the light may shine forth differently.

There's no one way of describing God that is sufficient - not one that gives an entire picture. After all, some of the images we use are contradictory, and this, in fact, is a good thing. God is beyond our knowing, our metaphorical grasping. God is just as much the faintest whisper on a mountain top as God is the triumphant clamor of a curtain, ripping and crashing to the ground. Just as much the gentle caress of a sick child and the bursting forth from a tomb.

And in the instance of Thomas, there are many lights shining through this prism of our understanding. Ones where we are encouraged to tune our ears to the whispers we normally ignore, and ones where we realize that sometimes our imaginations actually aren't enough - ones where we need to feel the weight of that curtain crashing upon our very bodies.

I want to play around with a little bit of poetic omission in the story of Thomas. Listen to what happens when we read the ending of this story omitting the last two sentences, which for those of you who were not listening, it ended like this: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Let's try it, but without that:

Now, Thomas, one of the twelve (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. And although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." And he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe," and Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God."

Can you not hear the tears welling up in Thomas's voice, in the beginning, when speaking with the disciples? I really do hesitate to read stubbornness into his tone, but rather a kind of heartbreak. And then Jesus, appearing to his friend before Thomas ever needed to ask, walks over to him, and presents his body to him. And Thomas, holding back those same tears, says in a whisper, "my Lord and my God."

It feels different when we read that passage without assuming the disappointment in Christ's final words to Thomas. (And after all, that's actually an interpretation of tone that we don't have the luxury of being privy to.) Beyond this, Jesus does the exact same thing for the rest of the disciples in the beginning of today's Gospel reading: he appears to them and directly after sharing his peace with them, he proceeds to offer his body as reassurance, remembrance. How odd that they failed to mention that when Thomas expressed his own need, when he said that he needed to see and needed to feel the body of his Savior. *Of course he did - so did they.*

And Jesus did not condemn them - he offered his body without question. In a way, it was another crucifixion. His body broken for the sake of the whole world: those wounds re-entered, re-restabbed by the hands of his friends so that they might believe. Done before any of them even had to ask.

I find this way of reading the story to be deeply empowering because instead of walking away feeling like, "Wow, my faith is really just too weak." Or walking away feeling ashamed that I'm also fearful, and I also sort of want to put my hands into Christ's side, because I think that would help. Instead of that, I walk away feeling like maybe you and I could play a part in making Christ known to one another.

I'm reminded of St. Teresa of Avila's famous words:

*No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours.*

The body that was presented to the disciples (and in particular to Thomas) is no longer here. The reassurance that came from his flesh is now our responsibility: sacramentally politically, physically, and emotionally.

This is what we do when we partake of the Eucharist together. This is what we do when we work together to end systemic injustice. This is what we do when we lift a burden too heavy for someone else. This is what we do when we grieve alongside the mourning.

So next time that you extend your hand to help someone, make sure that it is pierced. Next time you are sweating on behalf of another, make sure that your side is bleeding. And when there are tears rolling down your shoulder from the face of a child, take their hand and let them feel your wounds. You are Christ's body, and this is a world riddled with fear.

May our bodies be markers of Christ's passion, emblems of Christ's salvation, and carriers of Christ's love. For his is a passion for all people, a salvation for all people, and a love that is deeper than we can ever know.

Jesus is not afraid of you. Jesus is not afraid of your questions - especially the ones that you've been told over and over, not to ask. And this truth lives on in our very flesh, both individually and corporately, and it's our job to share it.

And Thomas, holding back those same tears, says, in a whisper, "my Lord and my God."

Amen.