

Easter 2B (4/8/2018)

Acts 4:32-35

Psalm 133

1 John 1:1-2:2

**John 20:19-31**

*Death is personal, but so is the living Christ. The gospel truth, as Thomas learns, is not “something to be believed but someone who makes believing possible.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus offers peace to each of us at the opportune time, sustaining us for the work of discipleship to which he also calls us.*

We’re well aware of the reputation the disciple Thomas has earned as a result of the famous resurrection story in our Gospel from John today. The conventional interpretation sets Thomas apart as a negative example, urging later followers of Christ to believe in the resurrection even though we “have not seen.” But upon closer reading, this interpretation is unfair to Thomas. He demands nothing more than what the other disciples have already experienced, that is, to “see the Lord.” And, who among us has not wished for clearer evidence of the resurrection? What’s more, the traditional focus on the disciple and his doubt tends to distract from the heart of the Gospel. **This is a story about Jesus, not Thomas.**

**More specifically, this is a story about Jesus’ “generous offer of himself” to the individual disciple.<sup>2</sup>** For as devastating as the cross is to Jesus’ wider movement, his death is also personal. Thomas is as heartbroken as any of Jesus’ followers of in the wake of his execution; his rabbi and friend

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, “When Seeing is Believing,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5123>.

<sup>2</sup> Gail R. O’Day, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 852.

has been taken from him. And what's worse, Thomas has missed out on Jesus' previous appearance to the disciples, so he's grieving alone.

Yet, **Jesus does not abandon Thomas**. In fact, he makes a point to return specifically to Thomas because Thomas is the one who still needs to see him. "Peace be with you," Jesus repeats to everyone gathered in the upper room. Then to Thomas, he says: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." It's possible to hear this as a reproach: *Since you demand proof, Thomas, here it is. But you shouldn't have needed it in the first place. But, I hear Jesus' words instead as an offer of loving reassurance: I know you're in pain and you feel alone, Thomas, but I'm here with you. See the scars of my suffering – it hasn't done me in. I'm alive. Take heart!*

**Death is personal, dear church, but so is the living Christ. The gospel truth, as Thomas learns, is not "something to be believed but someone who makes believing possible."**<sup>3</sup> That someone comes to **Thomas at the opportune time with an offer of peace that passes understanding. And thus, Jesus reawakens his hope, sustaining Thomas for the work of discipleship to which Jesus also calls.**

This past Wednesday marked the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. Amid the flurry of reflections on his legacy, it's

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis.

important to recall that King's unyielding commitment to racial, economic, and geopolitical justice was grounded in his faith. **For King, God was fundamentally personal, the champion of each individual disciple:**

Admitting the weighty problems and staggering disappointments, Christianity affirms that God is able to give us the power to meet them. [God] is able to give us the inner equilibrium to stand tall amid the trials and burdens of life. [God] is able to provide inner peace amid outer storms. This inner stability of the [person] of faith is Christ's chief legacy to his disciples. He offers neither material resources nor a magical formula that exempts us from suffering and persecution, but he brings an imperishable gift: "Peace I leave with you." This is that peace which passeth all understanding.<sup>4</sup>

This conviction emerged from a particular experience that King describes in a famous sermon. Increasingly aware of the threat to his safety in the wake of the Montgomery bus boycott, he was beset with fear. After an especially menacing anonymous phone call late one night, however, King had what I've come to think of as a "Thomas moment." I invite you to hear the story as he tells it in his own words:

[Excerpt from "Our God is Able"<sup>5</sup>]

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<sup>4</sup> "Our God is Able," *Strength to Love*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Strength to Love*, 113-14.