

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Instead of calling this “Low Sunday”, let us call it “Thomas Sunday”. Because today’s gospel reading focuses largely on him.

He is frequently dismissed as a doubter. "Doubting Thomas." That label is unfair...because the gospel heard this morning displays a remarkable trajectory. What do I mean by that? Well, in the span of almost no time, Thomas moves from discouragement, disbelief, and a wounded heart...to a confession of faith in the living Jesus. His exclamation of "My Lord and my God!" is one that remains unexcelled throughout the entire New Testament.

Easter Day, just a week ago, revealed the mistaken view held by many that Jesus was dead and would stay that way. Jesus did not stay dead.

And today, this Second Sunday of Easter, does the same. It also reveals the mistaken view held by many, perhaps once held by Thomas himself, that some of the disciples were simply unable to believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

And why would not that be the case? Put yourself in his place for a moment. He was either at the cross itself, or in the shadows nearby, close enough to see with his own two eyes. Jesus becomes very dead. Remember the Munchkin coroner from the Wizard of Oz movie, making that declaration of the Wicked Witch of the East? “As coroner, I must aver. I’ve thoroughly examined her. And she’s not only merely dead. She’s really most sincerely dead.”

So when the others tell Thomas about seeing Jesus again, he says, “C’mon! Dead is dead. Why are you messing with me?” Can we agree that dead equals dead...what is so unusual about that equation? Putting ourselves in the shoes of Thomas, he does not seem so unreasonable at all.

But what is it about this gospel today that can sing out to us?

I had an encounter with a fellow I know here in Rome. He is my age and now he is in good physical shape. We were talking, one on one. And this strange look came into his eyes. A type of intensity. Brighter, like fire. And he told me this story...a memory of some 50 years that was as clear to him as yesterday.

When he was a school boy, in the 4th grade, he was about to start in a race. He was not looking forward to it at all because, from past experiences throughout school, he was among the very slowest runners. So, just before the race began, he said that he turned away for a moment, and uttered to God a simple, child’s prayer. And bang, the starting signal, and....all of the sudden, out of nowhere, he won.

He told me that it was not a one-time wonder. Throughout his school career, he was among the fastest runners in the lower grades, and eventually was a member of the high school's competitive running team. Slow no longer, God had performed a miracle in answering a little boy's earnest prayer.

What am I telling you? That God answers prayer? Sure, but there is more.

Both this story, and the gospel, actually tell of the transformation...the resurrection, if you will...of the one who had the direct experience of the events that otherwise have no logical explanation. When faced with a happening that is so extraordinary, so logically unbelievable, the friend from Rome and also Thomas 2000 years ago...could go in one of two directions.

In the case of Thomas, Jesus was dead in body...but Thomas does not remain dead in his unbelief. He does not remain faithless, if he ever was. He experiences a resurrection of his own.

Have you ever...ever...thought of resurrection in that way?

We often sort people...and that often includes ourselves. We label some as living, and other as dead. Some as good, and others as bad. Some as faithful, and others as skeptics. But reality is more complex. Lives are never static, as they are always in motion. What matters is not anything so simple as do you have faith, or do you doubt. To doubt one's own faith is to be human, that is all. So, the **quality** of doubt or faith needs to be considered.

Faith can be compromised in many ways...by fear, close-mindedness, lack of trust, pride, laziness, ingratitude. Faith like that gets stuck. Can get toxic, like an infection. We do not have to look far to find toxic faith in the world today, some of it with a Christian label.

Doubt, in various forms, is the same as well. And it is important to realize is that there can be honest doubt as well. Honest doubt.

People with honest doubt may, perhaps, want to have greater faith but struggle at great length with hard questions, hard circumstances. They will not accept a faith unworthy of the troubles of the world. Sometimes the doubter has been hurt, perhaps severely, and the honest doubter honors the reality of the resultant pain. The honest doubter refuses answers that are too easy, that do not recognize the dignity of the questions. In many of us there may be at least some of this honest doubt, this hesitancy to believe, this unwillingness to commit too easily.

But that honest doubt requires a balance as well. The honest doubter is not a closed person, and that person....like Thomas....remains open to faith. Being available to move from honest doubt to honest faith....perhaps once, perhaps more than once. This person remains open to receiving the gift of faith. That is, in my mind, one of the great gifts of the Episcopal Church...where you are not asked to leave your intellect, your reason at the door, but to feel free...even encouraged, urged... to question God,

to ask God for understanding about your journey through this life.

All of us are on the road of a spiritual journey. None of us is home yet, and all of us still have a distance to travel. But, at some point, when we are faced with the truth of the choice of faith, there is no where else to turn. The signs directing us forward are there for us to recognize, and they do not appear when we find them convenient, but rather they appear when it is time for us to be directed by them.

Thomas moves ahead when it is time for him to do so....eight days after the other disciples see the risen Lord. Jesus appears among them a second time, radiantly alive, and this time, Thomas is present. Jesus understands the need of the moment, and he graciously invites Thomas to satisfy his need for proof, to examine the glorious scars and believe. There is no evidence that Thomas touches the scars, and he may or may not have done so.

But what is clear is that, at crunch time...at the critical time of honestly facing the resurrection, not only of Jesus, but of himself as well, Thomas does not duck it. He moves ahead in faith. From honest doubt, he moves like a meteor to honest faith, a faith open enough to recognize that the man standing in front of him, this man he knows, this once-crucified, once-dead friend, is also his Lord and his God.

Others move ahead in faith for other reasons. Mary Magdalene comes into a living faith when the risen Lord speaks her name. The disciples assembled on Easter night are eternally transformed because they see Jesus alive, and they do not ask to see the wounds.

What is required for us to move ahead? We who do not see Jesus as any of them did, yet have faith, or at least want to have greater faith? We may be motivated by the wondrous complexity and beauty of creation, or the witness of other Christians, or an event in life that indicates God is at work. Any of these can lead us from honest doubt to honest faith.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." These blessed ones have come into having faith in the resurrection. Jesus does not require perfect faith. What he asks for is an open heart....one not closed to faith, but not closed by faith either. He asks for this open heart so he can lead us, and keep leading us, from honest doubt to honest faith.

The resurrection that brought Jesus back to life as the Christ also left Him physically scarred. Here he is, the man, appearing to his friends and showing them the scars that his life, his suffering, and his death inflicted on him. The scars of his human life remained..and they are still there...leaving us with the incredibly powerful and ultimate image that we have a permanently scarred God

Seeing those scars was enough for Thomas, because God said to him...and to us, that “I have scars and wounds, too, but here I am again, back from the dead...so believe”.

This Sunday is for those who want to jump on the bandwagon.

For those who are willing to follow the signs of God presence all around us and with us.

For those who can set their honest doubt aside, and get with the program of finding themselves resurrected as well.

It means we do not have to go looking for God’s presence any longer. We do not have to wonder where that “peace” is. The kingdom of God **is** at hand, and has been for two thousand years.

It is just that we have been looking too hard **for** it, and not recognizing the scarred hands and side that are already before us....the hands that hold us up before God in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.