

Sermons at St Paul's

The Second Sunday of Easter

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us set the scene as today's Gospel reading opens. Thomas and his ten fellow disciples have seen the worst happen that they could have imagined. Their teacher, their rabbi, Jesus, has been brutally tortured to death in public. The humiliation and degradation have been excruciating. Their female companions, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary of Magdala, and their sisters, though equally traumatized, have seen something that seems to have transformed them.

Despite Jesus' instructions— to head north into Galilee, where the resurrected Jesus will meet them -- nine of the disciples are holed up on the second floor of a house, perhaps where they had their last supper with Jesus?

The women have begun to change the emotions of trauma into the mystification of joy, because they have seen Jesus on Resurrection morning. The nine disciples in the upper room are still stunned with the shock of what has happened. And then Jesus walks in – doors locked and barred regardless.

Thomas is made of different stuff. He may be traumatized, shocked, humiliated and suffering – but he is not hiding. He has gone his own way. Perhaps he is one who gets through grief on his own, without other people around. But he hears about Jesus appearing to his disciples that Easter evening.

Can you even imagine with what anger he greets the person who brings him the news of Jesus' resurrected appearance? “ How do I get to the truth of this?” he asks. “ Don't play with me!”

Thomas, like the victims of traumatic violence everywhere, has a huge choice to make. A brutal choice. Will he stay in his pain and let his understandable anger grow? Or will he allow an opening for hope and healing to occur? This level of pain will not be healed lightly. Words about hope, or the idea of hope will not be enough for Thomas.

“Unless I see the mark of the nails. . .” he retorts. And Jesus does not blame him for his doubt, but appears again to them, this time when Thomas is present. And in one thunder strike of realization, Thomas sees Hope standing in front of him. Jesus, marred with wounds yet radiantly transformed into the Anointed One, the beloved of God, is standing before him, urging Thomas to reach out and become sure.

This gospel story about Thomas, despite his popular nickname of “Doubting Thomas” is not only about faith. It is about the ability of hope to transform human suffering. It shows how hope breaks through despair, grief and anguish to open the way of love.

We know so much in our world today about terror and trauma, that I think we can understand Thomas in some deep ways. We understand that every victim of violence and abuse is left with terrible doubt. “Did I do something wrong? Could I have avoided this experience if I had acted differently?” The soul-shaking doubt and loss of self-confidence that acts of violence leave in their aftermath are all too real to those who experience them. Thomas is our brother in this.

And perhaps that is why the gift of hope is so blessed. If we are given the gift of faith, that very faith will carry us through all sorts of difficulties. But even faith can be shaken, and need the honey sweetness of hope.

In the Acts of the Apostles passage today, Peter recalls the words of David: *“I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope.”* In the Epistle of Peter, there is more about the importance of hope: *“By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”*

So Thomas sees Hope standing before him, to remind him of his love of Jesus. It is the power of his doubt and his anger that turns suddenly into his revelation of faith: “My Lord and My God!”

Yes, Hope is usually the shy cousin of its partners Faith and Love. We speak of a “ray of hope” as though it is the first bit of light breaking through the darkness of a

leaden sky. We say of the first bit of good news after accidents or illness that finally, “there is a glimmer of hope.”

Yet as Thomas shows us, hope can be as strong and mighty a power as faith and love. Father Carlos Santos-Rivera, an Episcopal priest who has worked with many refugees, says that after their brutal experiences of fleeing their homes and countries to escape violence or persecution, when they have nothing left, it is the power of hope that drives refugees onward toward a better and happier life. And when they experience love and care, that hope is fed and strengthened.

In a world where the UN estimates there are 21.8 million refugees, we dare not underestimate the importance of hope. When the United States refugee resettlement program is reopened, we can again offer hope to families torn apart by violence.

In a city with the highest percentage of people living in poverty in our country, our gifts of food, clothing, volunteer hours and money help keep hope alive for people living in otherwise hopeless circumstances.

And then there is prayer, which is faith expressed to God in hope. Our prayers for the refugees, the poor and persecuted, for the ill and the needy in any way, are just like those rays of sunshine in darkness. Whether they are whispered pleas at 3 am, or the outbursting energy of Thomas, they express the same yearning hope: “My Lord and My God.”

Prize your doubts, dear friends. Doubt keeps us humble and uncertain. It reminds us that God is sure, and no human is. Take good care of Hope, and gently share it as you may. Jesus is at our right hand so that we shall not be shaken. As our patron saint Paul wrote *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”*

Amen