

Deeper than Proof

One morning while in seminary I decided to treat myself to an extra hour of sleep. It wasn't a big deal to skip Prayer once in a while though it *was* an important part of our life together. We gathered at 8am every day in a chapel about half the size of this chancel, and afterwards some would stay for a light breakfast on the back patio. Much of the fellowship of our community happened while in line for the toaster, drowsily sipping coffee after a late night of study. Sometimes guests to the seminary would also join us, so it could also be a chance to meet some interesting people.

On this particular morning, however, I remained in bed, confident that a little extra sleep was the better use of my time. It may have been. But I tend to doubt that it was. This morning our unexpected guest, I learned later that day, was a very slight and pleasant man wearing sweats and a very large ring.

I would love to tell you that I have no regrets, that I was not heartbroken at missing the chance to stand in the toaster line and sip coffee with Bishop Desmond Tutu, but as mornings go I'd like to have that one back. That was a visitor I would have liked to have chatted with...or for goodness sakes, simply worshipped with him. We all have those moments in worship when we wonder if God is even listening, or present with us or even awake with us if the service is early enough. But even if you're fumbling through morning prayer at 8:12 in the morning you can be fairly assured that if Desmond Tutu is in the pew two seats away from you that God is there and listening.

Not to compare myself to Thomas, but: Thomas missed out on a pretty big visitor too. The night of the resurrection...Easter evening, if you will, though no one called it that for centuries...just hours after Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple and Peter had seen the empty tomb, they gathered with other disciples behind locked doors. Jesus came to be among them. He was risen, and already they saw shades of his glorification as he appeared to them despite the doors being locked.

But Thomas wasn't there. I'll get back to what he missed out on in a moment, but John tells us that in this first appearance, Sunday evening, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit onto them but that Thomas was notably absent. There's no reason given and we don't know why, so it's clearly not important. They tell him what he missed, and he says that he won't believe unless he seeks the mark on his hands and side.

And so what do we call Thomas? *Doubting Thomas*. The lesson here is don't ever be the disciple who isn't in the room. Not only do you miss out on the Lord, but they might even give you a name that isn't very flattering and will likely stick for the next few millennia. Never mind that Thomas earlier in the Gospel showed signs of exceptional courage! Never mind that Thomas wasn't asking for any proof that the other disciples hadn't themselves seen!

In a way, though, Thomas personifies our own passage from skepticism, and even cynicism, to wonder and trust. This is part of what the Easter season is about. We don't simply celebrate Easter and get back to life as usual: we begin this holy season with the Easter Vigil and then move through these 50 days with a sense of awe and wonder as we are greeted by Jesus, despite the many doors that we ourselves have locked. Perhaps in this season we might think and pray on those doors.

When Jesus visits the disciples, he comes bearing gifts for them. He comes bearing Peace, and it is a peace they have not known before. He comes bearing the gift of forgiveness, for them to practice and offer to others. And he breathes on them, bestowing upon them the Holy Spirit.

Just hours after the resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples and he breathes on them. You may remember back to what we heard on the 5th Sunday in Lent and at the Easter Vigil, just a few weeks ago, in the passage from Ezekiel about the valley of the dry bones. Surrounded by the drying bones of a defeated army, Ezekiel is told by God to prophecy to the bones, and as he does God fills them again with breath. That which had died, that which had become hopeless, that which had been conquered was suddenly brought back through the breath of God. This is the very breath that Jesus gives to his disciples.

This was new life! They had become old bones, and suddenly a new spirit was among them filling them with hope and animating them with an entirely new force of life.

Jesus said, Peace be with you. *Peace*. This Peace was something entirely new in the moments after the resurrection. This peace, what we might call the peace that passes all understanding, tapped new wells of grace and love, for it was the peace that was offered *after* Jesus had endured what he had, it was the peace that was given *after* the hold of sin and death had been broken forever. D. Cameron Murchison reminds us that this is a peace that transcends fear and suffering, that this Peace

Applies at every point where we fear that God's goodwill for the world's well-being is a pious dream, out of touch with the chaos and hatred of

everyday life. For the one who offers the words of peace is the very one who had endured the brunt of that chaos and hatred, yet now stands in their midst – risen, indeed!ⁱ

This gift of Peace is Jesus' gift to us. That this peace came as a part of a package of holiness that includes the animating breath of the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins, tells me that this gift is more complex and nuanced than we might think, but for all that is more transformative as well. A peace that is offered with the holy spirit tells me that this the Peace of God is both lively and surprising, that it is not about retreating into palaces of isolated equanimity or even plush sofas of live-and-let-live ambivalence, but is rather rooted in the interconnected life of the Body of Christ itself.

A peace that is offered with Forgiveness tells me that it is a gift given, but that it's up to us what we do with it. Forgiveness is ours to practice, but if we choose not to do so then we don't experience the gift. So too with this gift of peace: it is a richer gift than we can imagine, but we must really commit ourselves to it. Discipleship has the same root as discipline, and that tells me that nurturing this peace that Jesus plants in us is something that comes from daily practices of prayer and compassion and intentional, God-bearing love. The Peace of Christ is the fruit of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but it is also the fruit of dying to self.

Thomas had missed out on Jesus the first time. But in the course of a week, somehow he moves from "seeing is believing" to "my Lord and my God," and it was more than just the ability to review the evidence.

We, too, hunger for something deeper than proof. When Jesus gave the gift of Peace, I like to think that they suddenly realized that without knowing it, it was the very thing that they were missing. This peace, that came with forgiveness, this peace that came with the generous movement of the Holy Spirit, was at the same time a new reality and an ancient truth, and it took this moment of revelation to bring it to life. "I finally see." They might have said. "This is who we were created to be," they might have added. But Thomas' words are the only ones we know, and they mean much the same thing:

"My Lord and my God!"

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Easter, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Year A, April 23 2017, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.

ⁱ *D. Cameron Murchison, John 20:19-31, Theological Perspective. Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 2, p. 398*