

Searching for the Real Jesus
3/30/08
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Who has ever even heard the name of the disciple Thomas without the preceding descriptive- Doubting? Our knowledge of Thomas is limited to these verdicts: Doubting Thomas doubted the risen Lord. Doubting Thomas doubted the truth about Jesus' resurrection until he put his finger in the wounds. Doubting Thomas is a reminder to Christians that there is no room for doubt in our belief. This is what we know about Thomas, and it is incorrect. It is time to undo these misconceptions about the disciple Thomas, not only to clarify a long misunderstood text, but to allow the text to more fully reflect back at us the parts of ourselves we see embedded in Thomas' search for belief in the risen Christ.

First of all, though Thomas does not believe the disciples' announcement about Jesus, it is important to note that the disciples did not seem to believe Mary's earlier announcement either of her encounter with the risen Christ. Only when Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed them his hands and his side did they recognize 'the Lord' and rejoice. In rejecting the verbal witness, Thomas is acting no differently from the other disciples.¹

Secondly, while Jesus was still alive, Thomas proved himself to be a worthy and faithful disciple. When, in the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus turns back toward Judea from Galilee to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead, his disciples beg him not to go, because the Jews there were trying to stone him. And Thomas turned to the disciples and said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." On that day, on the road to Judea, Thomas recognized Jesus for who he was and was prepared to die with him.

Finally, we can unravel this misreading of Doubting Thomas because the word 'doubt' does not even appear in the story in its original Greek. Though most English translations say-

“Do not doubt but believe,” a literal translation reads more like: “Do not be unbelieving but believing,” or “Do not be faithless, but believing.”² It would be more accurate, and a mouthful, to refer to Thomas as ‘The Disciple who is moving from unbelief to belief,’ but even then, what we really need to do is direct our energies away from Thomas’ descriptive and towards the true heart of the story. The story’s focus is not really about Thomas’s doubt and skepticism at all, as we traditionally interpret it. The story is about the resurrected Christ and the grounds of our faith in him. Thomas is confounded by the stories of Jesus’ resurrection, and he is struggling mightily to put the pieces of this puzzle together. Thomas is searching for a faith that floundered in the face of the horrible events of Good Friday, and he is searching for the Jesus who is Christ, the Son of God, giver of life to all who believe, the one Thomas was prepared to die with.

On Easter morning, everything changed for the disciples and followers of Jesus, in a way that those of us who never knew Christ on earth can’t possibly understand. And though Jesus had been telling them all along exactly how this was all going to go down, and how he would continue to be present in their lives after death, can’t we absolutely identify and empathize with their confusion and disbelief? We are not just talking about head-cocked, brow-wrinkled, question mark bubble above the head doubt about the guy standing in front of them claiming to be the risen Lord. No, we are talking about full blown, uncensored, hardcore lack of belief. Not just Thomas, not just the disciples, but Mary, too, by the empty tomb, and two disciples on the road to Emmaus and even a whole group of followers in Jerusalem, if you read the many accounts of Jesus’ appearance after the resurrection in all four Gospels.

What stands out for me in this particular encounter, what I find so profoundly moving about the disciple Thomas, is the sincerity of his refusal to believe the disciples and his probing curiosity to get to the truth of the matter. He was not going to ground his faith in the word of

mouth story about the bodily resurrection of his Teacher. Second hand accounts by his inconsistent colleagues in discipleship were not going to do it. If he was going to believe, truly believe something that the early Christian writer Tertullian claimed was so absurd it must be believed, Thomas was going to need to have a face to face with Jesus. And if a form appeared that looked like Jesus and talked like Jesus, Thomas was going to stick his hand out to see if he felt like Jesus, flesh and blood, muscle and bone. And then, only then, was he going to move from unbelief to belief. There was Thomas, alone among the disciples in his unbelief because he arrived at the scene a little too late, desperate for evidence that his Lord and Savior really had conquered death, body and all; he was stubborn and almost petulant in his insistence. There was Thomas, who had loved and lost, eager and anxious to put his hands on his beloved Lord, to ask a thousand questions about how this could be, but also set to throw his arms around him as he made his passionate declaration...

I think Thomas was a teenager.

Let me explain.

The great psychologist and educator of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, G. Stanley Hall writes this about adolescence:

This golden stage of adolescence, when life glistens and crepitates... has wrought a great work in the world and infected it with love of beauty everywhere. It is the vernal season of the heart and the greatest stimuli for the imagination... Their bud is curiosity...

staring, experimenting with sensation, surprise, active observation, the passion to touch, handle, taste everything...”³

Hall posits that adolescence is a time of life in which people are most fully alive; curious about the world, connected to each other, passionate about life and its possibilities.

This is a thrilling definition for a time in our lives that most of us cringe to think of! It is such an eloquent and rich description for a developmental stage that sends most parents of teenagers to the very edge of reason and sanity!

We are quick to dismiss the waxing and waning passions of a teenager; we become frustrated at their constant sense of urgency and their agonizing and their probing curiosity about everything. Oh, how we hope that they would move more swiftly along into adulthood, to a distant and ideal future where they can participate in the world as adult members of society.

But it is exactly this constellation of gifts- curiosity, yearning for relationship, urgency and passion, that draws Thomas towards Jesus and evokes the most powerful and complete confession of Jesus in the entirety of John’s Gospel: ‘My Lord and My God!’ Having not taken the disciples’ word about what they had seen, compelled to find out for himself whether or not this new Jesus is real, Thomas sees through the physical miracle to that to which it points: the full revelation of God in Jesus.

It could have gone another way, you see. Jesus might not have entertained the request at all, but enjoined Thomas to believe what the others have told him. Jesus might have refused to show his wounds, criticizing Thomas for not getting with the program already. And some people, who still read this story as Doubting Thomas, interpret Jesus’ words to Thomas in exactly this way, as criticism, words meant to shame and embarrass him for his request.

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” What Jesus has in mind in this statement is the future, a time not far off when he will have ascended to heaven and the option of seeing and believing will be off the table. But that time had not yet come, and Jesus does not deny Thomas his demand to see; he meets it, without conditions. He does not chastise or punish; Jesus offers himself graciously, giving Thomas what he needs for faith. And the moment that Jesus says, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing,” Thomas believes. It is not the physical touch itself that initiates Thomas’ belief, it is Jesus’ invitation to touch. Jesus reverences Thomas’ request and does what is necessary to move Thomas from unbelief to belief. Just in the same way he called out to Mary in the garden, when she could not see him for who he was. Just in the same way that he blessed and broke bread for the disciples on the road to Emmaus, because they did not recognize him. Just in the same way that he ate a simple piece of broiled fish to prove that he was not a ghost.

Jesus created, in these early encounters, a holding environment where those who loved him could question actively without fear of consequence; where they could explore the new angles and edges of their changing faith; and where they could ultimately rejoice and confess their belief in the risen Christ among them.

Though we cannot reach out our hands to touch his wounds, Jesus still invites us to share our curiosity, not to conceal it; to display our urgency and passion, not to tone it down; to be honest about our struggle with unbelief, not to fake it. And the God who calls us into relationship will meet us where we are and provide us with that which will move us from unbelief to belief.

The experiences of these early encounters with Jesus are instructive of the sort of spiritual formation we are called to provide as the church, to all ages. Not to chastise or shame those who

are searching and seeking, those who need proof or evidence to heal their unbelief, but to lift up the curiosity, even the skepticism and doubt, as vital to the faith journey. And this is where the teenager-ness of Thomas, and the gifts of our own youth, intersect to confer upon us new grace and wisdom for our endeavor.

On Palm Sunday, Dr. Walton and I had the privilege of sitting in with the Confirmation Class, taught by Rev. Davis for a handful of teenagers who are preparing to join the church as full and active members next month. The topic for the day was ‘Imagining Jesus,’ and Barbara spread around the table images of Jesus from various cultures. There was a Korean Jesus surrounded by children; and a Caribbean Jesus on the beach with shorts and sunglasses; there was even a Jesus who looked strikingly feminine. We each chose a picture that moved us, and we talked about why we chose that particular image. Well, there was also pizza on the table, and a packet of chocolate chip cookies, and we got a little distracted. Instead of staying on task and following the lesson plan point by point, chaos seemed to reign over that table, and I looked at Barbara. She was calm, and she was smiling, and she was listening. In between the chewing and the joking, we heard questions. “If you kill someone in self-defense, is that still a sin?” “If someone is really sick and on life support, is it OK to take them off?” “Why would God put atheists on earth if God knew that they wouldn’t believe in Him?” It was like Thomas was among them saying, “If Jesus really was raised from the dead, can I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and can I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side?” And Barbara listened, and she engaged the questions, and she never once mentioned that we were off task for that day’s lesson. And the teenagers responded, and they smiled, and Barbara’s

unspoken invitation, to set free that marvelous curiosity and creative imagination, turned loose a table full of young theologians and disciples.

From a developmental perspective, the church is long past this stage of adolescence and well into adulthood. For the most part, we are past the point of radical questioning and the uncompromising search for real, tangible truth. Where the main task of adolescence is identity formation, we are stuck in an identity that may no longer seem fresh, but is steady, reliable and orthodox. We have lost the boldness of Thomas to declare in truthfulness that some days we lose our belief and need God's help to move us back to faith. We have lost the passion and urgency of our adolescence that sent us out into the world to question everything, and to experience everything. Searching for the real Jesus is not just about coming to faith alone, it is about the quest for a new identity within a life of discipleship. It is an identity formed and nurtured within the faith community, and it requires recognition of a variety of spiritual gifts.

This story about the disciples and Thomas encountering the risen Christ is also a Pentecost story. Jesus says to the disciples, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It is the very moment when we, as a church, are offered the gift of the Spirit. It is the beginning of the New Creation. As God breathed the ruach, the breath of life, into the first human, so Christ breathed that same Spirit into the disciples after the resurrection.

When we lack the vision to see clearly the unique gifts that adolescents have to share, our faith is in danger of becoming stale. According to Austin Seminary professor David White:

Youth are vivid reminders of the creative powers that human persons embody as gifts of God. Each young person represents a surprising charism waiting to be revealed for the

healing of the world. Such gifts of power are not simply for solitary enjoyment but are gifts that allow the community to embody the beauty of God in a particular context...⁴

Youth can be prophetic voices bringing critical perspectives for the good of the world and the human family. It is in cherishing the gifts of all believers, including youth, that we live most fully into the Christian life of discipleship. And it is in this common life, lived together, that we encounter the real Jesus.

So contrary to the long held conviction in the telling of this story, we know now that Thomas was no Doubter. He was a disciple in search of faith. Like us, Thomas was searching for the real Jesus: the one who turned back towards Judea, risking his life, for the sake of a dear friend; the one who bid his followers to always invite the stranger into their home and break bread together; the one who calls us by our very name when we have lost sight of him out of fear or anger or grief; the one who could not be limited or defeated by death; and the one who always meets us where we are, no matter how far a field we find ourselves.

What Christ has done in the resurrection is made himself available to us in every age, and in every way, that we might come to believe, and in believing, bear witness to his Truth and love in the whole world. We come closer to finding the real Jesus when we cherish all the gifts of the Spirit and resist the temptation to exalt some gifts over others, at the cost of our wholeness as a community. We come closer to finding the real Jesus when we let go the traditionalism and orthodoxy that hold our creative imaginations captive. We come closer to finding the real Jesus when we, too, cannot be limited or defeated by death as we hope for the fullness of God's justice

in the world. And we come closer to finding the real Jesus when we are bold enough to reach out our hands towards the risen Lord, knowing that he will be there, waiting for us.

¹ O'Day, Gail. *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995.

² *Ibid.*

³ Hall, G. Stanley. *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Antropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education, vol. 2* New York: Appleton, 1904, in David White, "The Vocation of Youth... as Youth," *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary* Austin, TX: Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Spring 2008.

⁴ White, David. "The Vocation of Youth... as Youth," *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*. Austin, TX: Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Spring 2008.