

Scripture Reading:
John 20:19-31

The Wounds of Love

Every time the story of Thomas the disciple comes up I can't help but preach on it. I thought about straying from the lectionary this week and then I saw the text and I just couldn't. The main reason I feel compelled to preach about Thomas is because I like the man and quite frankly I feel he has gotten a bad rap. I want you to try to forget everything you know about the personality of Thomas for a minute. I want you to notice that not once have I called him "Doubting Thomas." If I had to give him labels I'd rather call him "Faithful Thomas," "Inquisitive Thomas," "Disciple Thomas," or even "Realistic Thomas." But not "Doubting."

Mainly because when we first see Thomas in the gospel he is anything but doubting - in fact he is the one who says to the rest let's go into Judea with Jesus and die with him. (John 11) He risks as a lead follower of Jesus.

The quality of character of Thomas has somehow been forgotten. And somewhere along the line he became an inferior disciple - who questions the reality of Jesus. I think the opposite is true.

Thomas 'the twin' (his proper title) urges others to follow Jesus even into danger. He is a strong supporter, believer, disciple and friend. Thomas is the one who isn't afraid to speak his honest mind. He is realistic - he names the dangers, he acts on what he believes. That to me is the character he lives out of when after he has seen his friend nailed to the cross and die he wants proof of his resurrection. When the other disciples tell him they have seen Jesus, Thomas is realistic he wants to know it's true - he wants to see it for himself. I don't fault him for that. What would you do after all?

Not only that did you notice that Thomas simply asked for the same thing the other disciples got and did. What did Peter and John do when Mary told them Jesus had risen?

Even before that, did Mary doubt?

Did Peter doubt?

Did John doubt?

We know they did, and yet somehow that was okay.

In fact John 20 tells us that the disciples rejoiced not before but after Jesus had appeared to them and shown them his hands and his side.

Now we might come to the conclusion here that all the disciples were just as bad as Thomas - or we might turn this whole story around and recognize that doubt and faith are completely intertwined. I honestly believe we have misunderstood faith when we have translated it as certainty. I no longer believe that 'more faith' means fewer questions. Faith and doubt are woven together. Faith isn't surety it is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

For me an ability to question in the midst of my faith has drawn me into a closer relationship with The Holy. I am now less certain about my answers and more sure of my faith. I now acknowledge my questions as a search for the Divine rather than a dismissal of God.

David Lose wrote: “Jesus’ words at the end of this scene aren’t...really about Thomas. After all, who are ‘those who have believed and not seen?’ (they don’t yet exist). Rather those who believe and have not seen begin with “the early Christian community to whom John writes...and continues to include all of us. .. Jesus isn’t so much rebuking Thomas as he is blessing us.”¹

Thomas to me is the example of how one becomes a faithful, devoted disciple. He asks the questions. He is realistic and he considers the cost of being the follower of such a man. And once he sees Jesus, Thomas is as devote in his faith as he is in his skepticism. He doesn’t merely look at Jesus and nod with a right then okay I see. No he is the one who confesses his belief whole heartedly. “My Lord, My God” he exclaims the title of Jesus. Thomas gives Jesus the highest praise of anyone. And then the author notes.

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). In other words, what happens to Thomas is exactly what John hopes will happen to each of us when we read his story."²

I began to wonder as I looked at this passage how it is that we may represent the risen Christ so that others may see and believe. I know that doubt is an essential ingredient of faith (at least it is for me). I also know that there are a lot of folks out there who question and wonder and doubt and when they encounter those who claim Jesus as their savior they are not always more convinced, in fact I often hear the opposite.

And then I wondered what is this story for us today as Easter people. As followers of the risen Christ, as disciples. How are we to show people that we believe. How are we to face their skepticism and doubts as we face our own? As disciples we often claim ourselves as ‘the hands and feet of Christ’ in today’s world. I think we can take too much ownership and begin to think we are God ourselves when we use that language but I do believe we are called to live as Jesus lived and so we are in many ways ‘the hands and feet of Christ’ or at least representatives of Holy life and action in our world today.

And that is what struck me when I read a poem by Thom M. Shuman:

Show and Tell

If we showed you our hands,
would you find them nicked from building houses
for the homeless,
or calloused from using the TV remote control too much?

¹ Lose, David workingpreacher.org

² IBID

If we showed you our feet,
would you find them toughened by walking the corridors
of a hospice with the terminally ill,
or wrinkled by too many hours in the hot tub?

If we showed you our hearts,
would you find them broken over the struggles of the lost,
the little, the last, the least;
or would they be clogged with the plaque
of our consumerised lives?

God of the empty grace, show us how
to be your witnesses.³

How are we living into a faith in which people just like Thomas encounter the risen Christ? How are we living into the resurrection as people who believe Jesus came to show all abundant life. I have no issues with T.V.'s, hot tub's or even shopping but I do wonder if we forget to love and serve and care for others as the body of Christ - how then do we expect people to see and believe. Do we ever carry "The wounds of love?" As Christians? As the church?

For me it is essential to note that Jesus even after his resurrection and new life still carried his scars. Scars given to him by people who could not accept his kind of love's embrace. Living a life as a follower of Jesus requires something of us. It requires a kind of love, welcome, acceptance and embrace of the other that some may find rather odd. It requires us to be set up to be questioned for our beliefs, and our faith. It will most likely require us to do things that even we ourselves wonder if we are really ready for.

Yesterday at the frameworks conference we were reminded of what it looks like to be church. We were shown a video that I have seen numerous times and I will track it down to show it to you in the next few weeks as together we begin to get really intentional about discovering what exactly it is we are called to as Squamish United church. Almost every one of the people who is fired up about their church speaks about the mission, outreach, service, and love they are giving. As a community of faith we are being called to more. And so again I wonder... What if in the midst of our doubt we chose to live in faith. What if when we recognize the difference the love of God has made in our lives we like Thomas are transformed in such a way that we can't help but proclaim Christ and follow him even to Judea.

What if we saw 'the doubters' in our world as people of faithful skepticism and questioners just as Thomas. What if we saw for ourselves and others "that doubt is not the opposite of faith but an essential ingredient? That hardboiled realism is an asset to vibrant faith? That we can bring our questions and skepticism, as well as our insights and trust, to our Christian lives? That we are among those blessed by Jesus for believing without seeing?

³ Shuman, Thom "Show and Tell" Fire and Bread - Ruth Burgess.

And what difference would it make if we knew this?

What if we saw *ourselves*, like Thomas, as model disciples prepared and blessed for faithful mission in the world?"⁴

Let's be honest with ourselves - people who are not coming to church are not coming because they don't see it and yet many are looking for proof. And the only proof available to them is us Christians. Our lives and our love is all they have to see. Our actions, our words, and the testimonies of our lives is how they will begin to see the risen Christ. Thomas is not the only one in history who has wanted proof before he continued to follow. Thomas isn't the only one who when he saw who Jesus really was he jumped on board. We are called to be living proof of God's love in our world and that will require us to live differently it will require us to bear the 'wounds of love.'

I am a lot like Thomas it wasn't until I saw people truly live in faith, their lives transformed by the risen Christ that I became a true follower myself.

And so today I ask you.

Are we willing to be disciples? To live lives transformed?

This congregation has been given the opportunity to live differently. To break out from behind the closed up doors in which we live our faith. And because of that My mind, my visions and my dreams for you are bursting forth - because I feel the spirit is asking us to engage in such discipleship. We are being asked to come out of hiding and live as disciples in our doubts and our faith showing the marks of love in this remarkable community in which we live.

May it be so.

⁴ Lose