



“A Visible Pointer to Faith”

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Second Sunday of Easter

I grew up hearing the story of Thomas as a doubter. Maybe you did as well. And I often wondered why dear old Thomas was singled out and isolated from the other disciples as someone who did not believe. As I recall, when Jesus came and stood among his disciples, he met a fearful group of people behind locked doors. I am sure they had every right to be afraid. Jesus, the one they followed and engaged in ministry with, the one they loved, the one they worshipped as the Son of God, had been crucified a few days before. They may have wondered if they were next.

But in the midst of their anxiety and doubt, Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” In other words, “Shalom; be calm, be still, relax, have no fear. See, I am with you.” And Jesus shows them his hands and his side. It is then that they rejoiced because they realized that Jesus was with them.

Thomas’ experience with Jesus is not that different from the other disciples. I don’t know why Thomas was not with his friends when Jesus came. Was he hiding somewhere else behind a locked door? Was he afraid as the other disciples were? Maybe he was, maybe he wasn’t. But he shows up (where the rest of them were) and gets confronted with this incredible news, “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas says to them, “I need to see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in his hands and my hands in his side in order to believe.” Thomas needed a visible pointer.

I don’t know about you, but I don’t always believe what I hear. It’s not that I’m a skeptic, but if I wasn’t there to experience what the person sharing the story or news experienced, it’s hard for me to get as excited about it as they are. I remember something that happened to me years ago.

When I was 5 years old, I lived in a two-story apartment house in London. The community in which I lived was very diverse. So it was not uncommon to live next to families that originated from Pakistan, North Africa, Jamaica, Italy, Ireland, or Poland.

My mother and I lived in the second floor apartment and a couple from Pakistan lived in the first floor apartment. They had a son named Ravi who was about 7 years old at the time I was 5.

Ravi and I were playmates. We could hardly wait to run around in the front yard of the house. First things were first. Homework always had to be done. Ravi and I played all sorts of games in that yard: ball, hopscotch. We even dug up worms out of the dirt. We had fun in that yard, but sometimes we would venture outside the gate of the yard which was attached to a brick wall. The wall was our fencing, and it was slightly higher than the gate.

One late afternoon, I went through the gate and watched as Ravi climbed up on top of the wall to sit on it. We were yakking and laughing away, while chanting “Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; all the King’s horses and all King’s men

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couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again." And then the wall actually fell down. Ravi was underneath it. I could see his face, but the rest of his body, from chest to feet, was trapped under that heavy brick wall.

I screamed and screamed and screamed until someone responded. It was my mother who came running outside to see me pointing at the wall, crying profusely. I didn't believe Ravi was going to live. My mother summoned me to get Ravi's parents. They were in the back of their apartment and didn't hear me scream.

When Ravi's parents and I came running outside, we saw my mother trying to lift the wall off of Ravi. I watched in amazement as the wall lifted higher and higher off Ravi's frail body – just high enough so that Ravi's father was able to pull Ravi out from under it.

Shortly after, the ambulance and fire department arrived at the scene. The ambulance rushed Ravi to the hospital. He was alive with broken ribs and legs. Ravi recovered after many months, and with physical therapy was able to walk again.

The firemen asked, "Who lifted the wall to get the little boy from under it?" Those who stood outside and saw what happened pointed to mom. The firemen were incredulous. They couldn't understand how this petite woman lifted up a wall that several firemen tried to lift together but just couldn't move. They had to break the wall up into pieces to remove it from the sidewalk. Ravi's parents and I saw my mother lift the wall, but the firemen weren't there. They couldn't believe.

So I'm taking the liberty this morning to redeem Thomas, and to say he was not necessarily a skeptic, he just wasn't there. A reality, Jesus' appearance, had been disclosed in the corporate life of the disciples which they were unable to communicate to Thomas on an individual basis.

Even though Thomas did not accept the testimony of his friends at that moment, he found himself in fellowship with them the following week. The disciples did not turn Thomas away because he did not accept their testimony. While Thomas was welcomed to be with them, Jesus showed up again and said to the disciples, "Peace be with you." (Shalom).

Why does Jesus take the time to reveal himself again to the disciples? He does it so that Thomas, who was not with them when Jesus first appeared, would come to believe as they did. Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus points to the reality of his own existence, and Thomas answers, 'My Lord and my God!'

There is no evidence in the text that Thomas actually touched Jesus' hands or side. So it is not touching Jesus that leads Thomas to this confession of faith, but Jesus' gracious offer of himself. Jesus gives Thomas what *he* needs for faith, by disclosing the reality of his resurrection within the community of disciples he had nurtured for ministry. Jesus reveals himself again so that the whole group would believe with one heart and soul in the risen Lord. Now with eyes of faith, they could continue the ministry that Jesus began.

Sometimes we need a visible pointer to the reality of God in Jesus designed to foster belief. That's what the church and our communities of faith are designed to do. The church is not a social club, but a community of people, as well as a place that offers compassion and solidarity to those who are suffering, doubting, studying, questioning, dreaming, believing, witnessing, and seeking justice.

Now you would think that would be enough, but there is more. The church is often referred to as an "assembly" which derives from the French word *eglise* which in Greek is *ekklesia*. But the word 'church' actually comes from the Greek word *kuriake* which means "belonging to the Lord." This belonging is established in a covenant relationship with

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God. So you and I, who make up the church, are not only in covenant with God, but with each other. You and I, then, become visible pointers to the reality of God in Jesus Christ.

We are a community of memory called to put each other in touch with the wisdom and beauty of the past, the stories of old, the stories of Jesus, the Christ. We do this by opening our hearts together to worship God as we are drawn out of ourselves to experience the sacredness of community in Jesus Christ. The church community is where we help in and outside of our community to lift the walls of injustice, despair, and pain that have fallen – fallen sometimes on us – and when we sometimes feel there is no escape.

Marcus Borg wrote in his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, “By living more deeply into our own tradition as a sacrament of the sacred, we become more centered in the one to whom the tradition points, and in whom we live and move and have our being.”

Wherever you are on your faith journey, the church, this church is where you make meaningful connections and experience a life of faith in a diverse community. It is where we may not agree on every theological position, but where room is made for creative tension, inherent in the church, to nurture all of us into a community that becomes the visible pointer to the reality of God in Jesus, the Christ.

Amen.

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