

The Woundedness of Christ

The focus of this story is always on Thomas, and he generally gets a bad rep – “Thomas the doubter,” he is called, the one who had to see and touch in order to believe. Never mind the fact that all the other disciples actually had to see Jesus in order to believe also. Never mind the fact that Thomas was apparently the only one who wasn’t cowering in the upstairs room with the door locked on Easter Sunday when Jesus came to them and appeared the first time. And never mind that a week earlier, when Peter had warned Jesus against returning to Jerusalem because they had tried to kill him, it was Thomas who had said to the other disciples, “let us follow him on to die.” Despite all that, he always remains, simply, doubting Thomas. But it seems to me we would be lucky to be Thomas in this story because I think he is the shining example of this text, the one who proclaims Jesus to be “my Lord and my God.” But the truth is, far too often most of us end up as the other disciples, not wanting to be called out by name. They conveniently evade our attention by never telling their story. No one writes in any of the gospel accounts about what they did for those three days between Jesus’ death and when he walks through those walls in his resurrected body, when he brings embodied hope back into their presence. No one wants to admit what they were thinking, how they were feeling, or what they did, or failed to do, in the wake of their disappointment on Good Friday. They had been looking for a different Christ, a Messiah who would conquer, not one who would willingly die on a cross. What they had thought the messiah to be had died, and they simply hoped that the ones who took their Jesus wouldn’t come for them next. And they huddled in the upstairs room and locked the door.

This is a story that I think should be familiar to many of us. We’ve been there; having lost our idea of who Jesus is, wanting him to be something in particular and finding out he is not, and then cowering, afraid to face the future amid our doubts, afraid to hope that he might be even greater than we had imagined, and instead just hoping to hang on. Maybe it has happened when we watch a loved one suffer from a terrible disease and we pray and pray to the Great Physician who heals people, and when the person continues to get sick and finally dies, our messiah dies too, and we hide out in the dark places of our doubt and lock the doors and pray that sickness doesn’t come for us next. Or, we believe in a God who creates meaning and gives purpose to our lives, and yet we cannot find meaningful employment and we have no idea what we are doing with our lives. We feel like we have failed and that our God has failed us, and in our shame we retreat from the questions into our homes, and we bar the door because we don’t want to admit our despair to others. Or again, we expect the Christ to be the one who grows his kingdom, and so we faithfully work at our ministry, and yet our greater church dwindles, our ministry efforts seem to fail, and our projects are not appreciated by those they are meant to serve, so we hide within the walls of our churches, and go through our rituals afraid to admit that we are overcome with doubts and have no good news to proclaim to the world because we’re not really sure who the Christ is anymore. Or maybe the hardest of all, we believe Jesus to be the one who loves in relationship, who said the world would recognize us as his disciples by our love for each other; and so we dare to love another, and when we are rebuffed, when marriages fail, relationships fall apart, and hearts break, the God of love seems illusory and we retreat into our loneliness, lock the door of our heart, and turnout the lights because we are tired of hurting, and have little faith

left. That's the unglamorous story that they fail to write and that too often we fail to speak. The truth is we all know what those did after Good Friday, we know exactly how they got to the upstairs room, huddled in the dark with the door locked, keeping quiet lest anyone know that they're actually there. Maybe they didn't need to write it because they knew we would know, or maybe they were just like us, and didn't want to admit that there are times when their faith fails and they are overcome with doubt.

It seems hard to believe that the disciples got to that place. They had the story at the fingertips. As they declare in the passage from Acts, they were "witnesses to these things." They had lived it, seen Jesus fulfill the prophecies, heal the sick, even bring Lazarus back from the grave, and yet they couldn't believe. However, we too know the end of the story in a way that is no less real. We sit in the reality of Easter Sunday, celebrate it in the Eucharist every week, and yet often still doubt the efficacy of Christ. In today's story, the disciples are confronted with a reality that walks through walls, and yet is solid enough that you can touch it. A Jesus that disregards our expectations and our boundaries, and comes in among us to open our eyes to a deeper truth. This reality is the Jesus we meet in the power of the Eucharist, overcoming the simple confines of the material world, being so much more than stale bread and sweet wine, and yet still saying 'taste and see that the Lord is good.' Touch the broken body of Christ, place your hands in the holes, come to the table and hold the broken pieces in your hand. Experience it with your own being. And there, meet the brokenness of Christ with your own brokenness, and together be made whole. That was the offer to Thomas, and it is the offer to us.

It is in the fractured places that we know God in our world. It is in the brokenness of his body that Christ makes real the vision of redemption. That is the key to this story. The wounded side is how he explains who the messiah really is. And while he wasn't what we thought, he is far greater than we dared hope him to be. In his woundedness he speaks welcome and peace to us in our own woundedness, saying, "Peace to you; you are not alone, huddled here in your upstairs room, scared and full of doubt. I am here among you." And then he says place your hand in my side and know. Believe that we have a God who came to earth and wept with us because he loved us. Know that he suffered and died for us so that we would know that we are not alone. And he lets us put our hands in his wounded side so that we know that he hurts with us, that he even hurt for us. So touch him, and then stop doubting and believe.

Christ did not come to stop all of the hurting. He participated in it, experienced it with us, and in that embrace of us and our condition, overcame it. The sickness of human sin took Jesus, just as sin and death will overcome all of us, but somehow it is the singular Christian belief that in this there is yet victory, there is life eternal and hope for us in the here and now because he has entered those situations that cause our doubts. There was a job that Jesus wanted to do and it appears they did not want him in return, but he still fulfilled his calling in the world, and so can each of us. Jesus set out to build a kingdom of God on earth, and two thousand years later it still often looks like his ministry was less than a rousing success, and yet we still believe he is working, and he invites us to work with him to create the kingdom. God came to earth because relationship was so important, so core to God's own being, and so every broken relationship hurts God, and yet God is still working to reconcile the world to himself, and asks you to love with the same love with which he first loved you. The doubts are real and the pain true, but there is a Eucharistic promise of wholeness that is deeper and truer. Go ahead, touch

his side and know. Have faith that he knows where you are in your doubts and fears, and he wants you to know where he is. He has come among us, and he is sending us out to spread this good news and join in his work.

While they were hiding in the upstairs room, Jesus was working; he was busy harrowing hell, and setting the captives free – and even the gates of hell did not prevail against him because even sin and death could not hold those Jesus was coming for. And when he had finished his work there, he made it clear that the grave could not hold him in either. So he returned to earth to save us from our own hells – those places of doubt and fear and despair, those places where we close ourselves off from the possibility of something greater, from the prospect that there is indeed good news in our stories, because we have a deep fear that there may be something worse. But it is through those doors that we have closed and locked that Jesus walks, because the barred doors of our hearts and the walls we erect to keep people at bay will never hold him out. Christ is risen and he is on the move. He has come among us. So come to this table with all of your doubts and shattered expectations. Come and touch the broken body of Christ upon the altar. Taste and see. And then believe, because Jesus is sending us out. There is work to do in this world, and Christ is asking us to join with him to forgive sins, heal the sick, and preach the good news that there is a God who knows us in our darkest places and yet will not abandon us, but has chosen to love us still. Amen.