Second Sunday of Easter April 19, 2020

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Thank God for Thomas! He is the patron saint of India, and, according the the Thomist Christians, he traveled there after the resurrection. We know little about him other than this tradition and a few interesting passages in the gospels.

For instance, in the eleventh chapter of the gospel of John, the apostles are reluctant to go back to Judea after Lazarus has died. Some Judeans had attempted to stone Jesus and the disciples would meet resistance if they went. Thomas will have none of it,. He says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Later, in the 14th chapter, Jesus predicts his own death, and that he will prepare a heavenly home for his followers who will join him there. Thomas replies, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, and how can we know the way,” to which, memorably, Jesus replies, “I am the way, the Truth and I am Life.”

In today’s gospel, ten of the disciples have reported seeing the resurrected Lord, and now, the next day, they are meeting with Thomas behind closed doors, in fear for their lives. Thomas is skeptical. He was not with them when they saw the risen Christ. We don’t know what was behind the vehemence of his response to their claim. What he says is, “Unless I see on his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

Thomas had been willing to follow his Lord anywhere, even into danger. Now, he is left out, abandoned. We don’t know much about the dynamics of how the disciples related one to another, but it is likely Thomas is feeling isolated. What we do know is that the Lord who could not be restrained by closed doors, who had compassion on those who abandoned him at the cross, the same Lord now reveals himself to the disciple who doubted.

The writer, Fred Buechner, reasons, “If you take away my doubt, you take away my faith.” Doubt and faith are inextricably intertwined, and faith would have no meaning if doubt did not exist. The introduction of doubt in the resurrection narratives makes the narrative more accessible and more convincing.

Doubt humanizes; fear confuses and dehumanizes. Doubt and fear inhabited the room where the disciples met behind closed doors. It could have led to division and strife. But into that fearful room Jesus appeared to the doubter, changing his doubt into faith; their fear into love.

The disciples who were confronted by an empty tomb later experienced visions of their dead leader. The invitation of Jesus to Thomas to touch his resurrected body is intended assert the reality of the resurrection. But we don’t know that Thomas accepted the offer, that he touched the visionary body which could suddenly appear in a room without opening the doors. My reading of the story is that, being confronted by a vision, and the vision speaking his name and offering himself, Thomas spontaneously believed as he said, “My Lord and my God.”

Resurrection is a difficult concept to grasp. Artists of the Medieval period and of the Renaissance seldom attempted to paint it. Their favored image was the cross, and along with it, the deposition, as he is taken down, and the poignant image of Jesus’ body resting in the arms of his mother, Mary.

The tomb was empty when the women arrived at dawn to anoint the body, and for some time the disciples were the ones entombed, hidden behind closed doors, confused, seeking release form their fear, and slowly believing in the continuing life of their leader and friend.

The resurrection of Jesus is a call to abandon whatever entombs us, whatever binds us, as Lazarus was bound in death. When Lazarus leaves the tomb, he was changed by endurance, by suffering, by love.

We don’t immediately recognize the divine, the God in us and others. In this we are like the disciples, who were sad and fearful until they saw Christ’s wounds, and until he broke bread with them. We are like Mary, who recognized him in the compassion in the voice of the man speaking her name at the empty tomb.

When we say our alleluias, remember that for the disciples, as for us, there is fear, doubt, pain and confusion before the message of deliverance resonates and we can say, with the Church Universal, he is risen indeed.