

A sermon preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Oak Park, IL
on the Second Sunday after Easter, April 11, 2009 by Alda Balthrop-Lewis

Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

Jesus's follower Thomas has a reputation among us, and it's not for shouting Hallelujah when Jesus came back. Instead, we call Thomas the doubter. And so this second Sunday of Easter, as the Church proclaims Christ risen indeed, we read about doubting Thomas. Which is a comfort, I think, for those among us who find it hard to celebrate the resurrection without some niggling doubts of our own.

Thomas is the skeptic among the disciples, at least that's his reputation. In today's gospel, as we proclaim Christ risen indeed, Thomas is the last of the followers of Jesus to believe that Jesus has risen, and he insists on a gruesome burden of proof. He says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." He won't believe that Jesus is back until he himself sees the wounds. He won't believe that Jesus is back unless he himself feels the holes in Jesus's flesh. He won't believe the testimony of the other disciples; he has to see it, has to feel it for himself.

On Good Friday, a little more than a week ago, we gathered here to remember the death of Jesus, as Christians have done for ages. On that day especially, we stared down human cruelty, not turning our face away from the evil we have done and the evil done on our behalf, but looking it square in the eyes – as the innocent man we believe came from God died on the cross. It would be natural to turn away from such a trauma. In the gospel of Matthew and Mark, only the women who followed Jesus are present at the crucifixion, the disciples are strangely absent, and even in Luke, which claims the manly disciples were there too, they stood, as it says, at a distance. Staying at a distance seems natural when faced with the gruesome truth of Jesus's death. But for that day, on Good Friday, we sat with the trauma, let it rest in our minds, as we felt out its shape and its sharp edges.

I have been thinking about Thomas this week in a Good Friday sort of way. I have been thinking about him not simply as the one who wouldn't believe, but as the one who wanted to face the gruesome truth of Jesus's torture and death. For Thomas, the trauma of Jesus's death couldn't be put aside simply by the disciples' announcement, "We have seen the Lord." For Thomas, really understanding that trauma meant feeling out the dark truth of the past, even putting his finger in the wounds of Jesus's hands and his hand in the gash on Jesus's side, feeling out its shape and its sharp edges.

I have a story to tell you about feeling out the shape of pain. In 1959 L Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, moved to Saint Hill Manor in East Grinstead, England, a small town about an hour from London by train. He started a little school there, to teach his ideas about what he called the science of the mind. He was, funnily, the East Grinstead Road Safety Committee organizer, an East Grinstead Parade Marshal, and he sponsored children's cycling competitions. Saint Hill Manor is located outside of East Grinstead, among gently rolling hills. Just down a narrow country road from the manor there is a small cottage with a quaint garden in front. My father moved into that cottage in 1960, to study at the school with L Ron Hubbard. He spent a few

months travelling around the Mediterranean with Hubbard on a boat, looking for a place Hubbard had lived in a former life. They found that place on the west coast of Sardinia. My father remembers it with fondness, I think, as an adventure he had when he was a young man. I don't think he ever considered himself a practitioner of Scientology. He was looking for wisdom, I guess.

Anyway, the point is, he and my mother came back to the United States in 1961, they were married, they had my sister and me, they owned and operated a seafood market, and some time in the 80's when I was a child, all that remained of my dad's early fascination with Hubbard's philosophy, all that remained for me to see at least, was a practice he and my mother taught me to do when I hurt myself, called a touch assist. If I stubbed my toe, or scraped my knee or shut my finger in the car door, they would remind me how.

One day, the first time I learned to give myself a touch assist, the car door did close on my finger, I wailed and cried and screamed, my dad came over to me, calm as could be, and asked me what had happened. I cried out an account of the story, "I blub blub closed the door blub blub on my finger." He asked to see my finger. I showed him. He asked me to show him where on the door my finger got caught. I showed him. He taught me then to gently touch my finger to the door, just where I had hurt it. He told me that he didn't want me to be scared of the place, and that understanding how I had hurt myself would help the pain ease.

It did. It calmed me, helped me think about what had happened, face the trauma, small as it had been, and get ready to move on to the next thing.

It's a habit I retain to this day, the practice of investigating the site, remembering the circumstances that led to whatever sufferings I face, and it is, for me, evocative of how I have been thinking about Thomas this week, Thomas who wants to know the site of Jesus wounds with his own hands, to experience them himself, to feel out their shape and edges.

He says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." And the Good News is that Jesus gives Thomas *exactly* what he needs. He had already appeared to Mary Magdalene – he had given her what she needed to believe. He had come to visit the disciples, to give them what they needed to believe. And because he was so closely bound in love to Thomas, as he is to all of us, he said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Jesus offered to Thomas the very thing Thomas knew he needed, the opportunity to feel the shape of the wound with his own hands, to face the truth and thereby know it for himself. Jesus not only allows Thomas's doubt, he embraces it, even to the point of letting Thomas feel out the shape of the wound with his hands, to know its edges for himself.

Jesus also says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." And maybe sometimes we all want to be that kind of Christian, the kind who has faith without having seen. There are certainly Christian traditions that emphasize the necessity of this kind of certainty. But, Thomas was also the one who said, in John 11:16, when Jesus is getting ready to reenter hostile territory and risk death to raise Lazarus, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

And maybe doubt of Thomas's kind is its own kind of faithfulness. It is honesty that leaves space for questions. It is self-understanding that allows us to express our needs to God and

wisdom that allows us to see when God has come to us to let us feel God's wounds. And it is willingness to experience God's wounds in a visceral kind of way.

The story of Thomas tells us that whatever we need in order to believe, God wants us to have. Jesus came to Thomas, the skeptic, to say you are loved and cherished. He met Thomas in his doubt with an incredible intimacy, reach out and touch my body, Jesus says, "Put your finger here."

The risen Jesus comes to us again and again and again, as he came to Mary Magdalene, to the disciples, and to Thomas. He comes to us with incredible intimacy. To us he doesn't say, "put your finger here," but instead, "this is my body, given for you; this is my blood shed for you." Put it in your mouth. Feel its shape with your tongue and its edges on your teeth. Touch and taste and smell and see for yourselves.

As the apostles say in today's first lesson, "we are witnesses to these things." The Lord is risen indeed and they have seen it. Jesus's followers cannot keep from speaking about what they have seen and what they have heard, even in persecution, because Jesus came to them, whatever their questions, whatever their doubts, and offered them the chance to feel out the shape of those things, to finger their sharp edges, to know the depth of his wounds, the height of his love, and the vastness of his peace.