

Easter 2B. John 20:19-31.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

I’ve never met an Episcopalian who wasn’t willing to defend Thomas. There seems to be a denomination-wide conspiracy to rehabilitate his reputation. Of course we see ourselves in him, and if we can establish that there’s nothing wrong with his faith, then maybe there’s nothing wrong with ours, either. And there isn’t anything wrong with his faith, or with doubt. As far as I can tell, it doesn’t make much sense to think of doubt as the opposite of faith. Apathy is a better candidate for faith’s opposite, in my opinion. Doubt is a part of faith, is a part of living a faithful life. And a faith that does not have a way to incorporate occasional ambivalence and doubt will prove brittle. It will, I know from experience, crumble at its first serious challenge. Give me, every time, a faith that is resilient enough to encounter doubt and eventually wrap it around with trust, rather than trying to keep it out altogether until it batters down the doors and sends the whole house tumbling down.

Thomas is a well-known Episcopalian, not just because of his doubt but also because of his insistence on embodiedness. He wants to put his hand in the wounds, to touch the body at its woundedness. We Episcopalians don’t always get everything right, but one thing we’ve been pretty reliable on is that the body matters, that a faith that would be just fine without bodies is not for us. The resurrected lord still bears wounds, and can be touched—from this we have learned that our bodies, wounded and healed or not, beautiful and flawed, matter. They matter to God and they matter to us.

But “Thomas is an Episcopalian” is an old trope, a too comfortable trope. It makes us feel complacent, which has nothing to do with the gospel’s message that we are loved. We may think that if we can rehabilitate Thomas, we won’t have to be transformed ourselves. But I’m afraid that this passage in no way supports that interpretation. Instead, it calls us to a witness that is well beyond Thomas. Thomas has to see and touch to believe, and we empathize with him. But we of course are among those who hope to be blessed as we try to come to believe without having been able to see. And, what is even worse, we are what a world that has not seen sees. The world that does not have Thomas’s advantage of a special return call of the risen Lord instead relies on our witness for the reality of the resurrection.

Everyone now is among those after Thomas, those who do not see. And everyone, every bit as much as Thomas, is in need of the word of resurrection. The world desperately needs a reason to believe that death is not the worst thing that can happen to us, that forgiveness is more than foolishness, that justice and mercy can embrace. The world desperately needs to hear that the truest thing about it is that it is loved by God, loved with a love that is stronger than the forces of death. Thomas got this news with a special visit from the resurrected Jesus, whose resurrection was, among other things, the ultimate vindication of his life. The appearance of the risen Lord to Thomas is assurance to him that Jesus’ life and teachings were true.

Our position, as members of the church who have somehow been made alive again by God, is not just among those who can only believe without seeing. We are tasked, together, with being the evidence of the resurrection. The only really effective Christian apologetic is the life of the church. The world can hear the gospel best when it sees the kind of life that the gospel has made possible for us. A life that is based on forgiveness and grace, that has no truck with zero sum games, that can risk everything for good because we are assured of what is most important. A community that can be wounded without wounding back. We are not the risen Jesus—but the life that the risen Jesus makes possible for us, together, is the only really compelling evidence for the resurrection available.

Of course none of us can do it alone. We do it, as imperfectly as we do it, together and by the grace of God. The Lord is risen! How do we know and why on earth should the world believe it? Because of how we love each other and the world. Amen.