

Redeeming Thomas
John 20: 19-31
Jon Frost

Many of you know I am a die-hard Phillies fan and, more broadly, have always loved the game of baseball itself. It has always felt to me that it was in God's great providence that the season of Eastertide always coincides with the beginning of baseball season. I really missed that congruence last year as the start of the major league baseball season was delayed. Another thing I missed last year, which I have been delighted by this year, is the presence of fans.

Now, Philadelphia sports fans are a fascinating subgroup of humanity, worthy of the deepest sociological study. They are also largely defined, in national sports coverage, by one overarching narrative: namely that we are hostile, unruly, and entitled. Listen to any game covered by national media and you will get the impression that Philadelphia is the only place where the fans boo and raucous behavior occurs in the stands. And this tired narrative, from which Philly fans will likely never escape, has a lot to do with that one time that some snowballs may have been thrown at someone dressed as Santa Claus at an Eagles game.

"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands," the disciple Thomas said, "and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." With this statement, said long ago and read and interpreted throughout generations of the Church; and paired with the unflattering moniker "Doubting Thomas," the narrative of this disciple has been solidified. Don't be a Doubting Thomas. If you want to know what not to do, how not to act, just look at ol' Thomas here. But is there more to see here? Have we gotten Thomas all wrong? As I've sat with this story, rather than epitomizing a lack of faith, I actually see in Thomas an example of true faith and a deep challenge to the Church as we discern our mission.

The project of redeeming Thomas really isn't difficult if we read the story. Right before our passage begins we are told that Mary Magdalene went to the disciples and announced, "I have seen the Lord." Did they believe her? On the evening of the day of resurrection the disciples are huddled together behind locked doors when Jesus appears. Verse 20 - it is only after Jesus showed them his hands and his side that the disciples present recognize him.

But Thomas wasn't there that night. So after a, "Hey guys what'd I miss?", they tell him, "we have seen the Lord." Yes, the exact same thing Mary had told them earlier. And Thomas isn't ready to believe, just as they did not believe, until he sees and touches the hands and side of Jesus. So, he is essentially setting the same conditions for belief as what it took for the other disciples to believe.

A week later, again when they are behind locked doors, Jesus appears but this time seemingly exclusively for Thomas's benefit. Jesus invites him to touch His hands and His side and says, "Do not doubt but believe." What plays out between Jesus and Thomas is exactly what played out between Jesus and the other disciples. In both instances there is an announcement about having seen the Lord, which is not believed. Then, there is an appearance by Jesus where He shows the wounds in His hands and side and then it clicks for the disciples. They recognize Jesus. It says the disciples rejoiced after seeing Jesus' wounds but when Jesus appears to Thomas and speaks to him, Thomas responds with arguably the most profound confession of faith in the whole gospel of John: "My Lord and my God."

When you get right down to it, Thomas acted no differently than any of the other disciples in the days following Jesus' crucifixion and burial. If we're honest, we wouldn't have acted any differently. But, as much as we've made this story about Thomas, it isn't about him or the propensity for any of us to lack faith. It is about the power of the presence of the risen Christ who still, in His body, bears the marks of His suffering. And it's about the lengths He will go to meet His disciples precisely where they are. Notice that we're never told whether Thomas actually touched Jesus' hands and side. I have to think when he is face to face with Jesus what he thought he needed in order to believe no longer mattered. And this is where Thomas shows us what faith looks like. Faith is trust. It is relational. It is confidence in God whose faithfulness is revealed most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ. It is this kind of faith, this trust in a relational God, that compels Thomas to say, "My Lord and my God."

This chapter of John's Gospel ends with a nod to future generations of the Church. The disciples in this story believed because they saw the risen Jesus. But, Jesus says in verse 29, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." It would not be long before there were no eye witnesses left. And yet, the Church has lived on, making disciples throughout the generations; disciples who have believed without seeing.

As I think about the history of the Church and our particular moment in that history, I'm struck again by Thomas's words in verse 25 and how important it was for him to see and touch the wounds of Christ. I don't hear stubborn doubt. I hear profound conviction and a challenge for us to discern our mission, especially when historically and in our day so much is done and said in Jesus' name that bears little resemblance to the one who endured the cross. "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." In other words, "If the Jesus you think you saw did not bear the marks of the cross, it wasn't him." "If the Jesus you think you saw did not suffer for the sake of the world, it wasn't the Jesus we followed."

Translated into statements about the mission of the Church, which is the body of Christ in the world, it would sound something like this: Unless we bear the marks of suffering for the sake of our neighbors who are suffering, we are not representing the risen Lord. Unless we draw near to the wounded and those scarred by oppression, we are not

representing the risen Lord. Whenever we are the ones inflicting the wounds and doing damage to others, we are not representing the risen Lord.

Thomas would accept nothing less than the Jesus he knew had suffered and died, and who he desperately wanted to believe now lived. Likewise, the world needs nothing less than a Church willing to stand in solidarity with those who suffer in mind, body and spirit. The world needs nothing less than a Church ready to bear the marks of suffering for the sake of the world even as it bears witness to the risen Lord, whose victory over death assures the end of all suffering. This is the task for which we are sent by Jesus, empowered by the Spirit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.