

Acts 5:27-32
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20: 19-31
Psalm 118:14-29

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Year C

Ants in the Pants of Faith

May the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer, AMEN.

Awestruck with hearts still filled with joy and alleluias, here we are a week after Easter, moving on, but not so fast. Thomas calls us up short.

Imagine you're a contestant on Jeopardy and say, "Let's try Biblical History for forty." "Which of the disciples is famous for his doubt?"

Thomas. Bing, Bing, bing. Exactly right. And therein the problem lies. Because Thomas has become a cliché. Don't be a doubting Thomas.

Cliches make great shortstops. When we assume we know, we stop thinking, probing, imagining, cheating only ourselves.

Like Thomas, Job is often reduced to a cliché by his "patience." But Job wasn't patient at all. He was furious and his righteous anger, not his patience, was what God answered. But that's a sermon for another time. Yet like Job, Thomas with his "doubt" demands a direct encounter with the risen Christ and he gets it but not right away. John tells us he waited a week. But I'm getting ahead of the story.

Try upgrading Thomas to "curious" instead of "doubting." It's definitely more positive. As one who's always curious, I've thought a fair amount about curiosity. Now I no longer say, "I was just curious" when asked to explain something I've done – like leave for Saigon two month after graduating for college-- because I realize now that the Holy Spirit, at least in my life, has acted through curiosity. Often it's been the tap on the shoulder that's steered me into deeper waters where I never intended to go but knew I belonged once I arrived.

Thomas, in the aftermath of something that was unbelievable, impossible, and unimaginable, wonders if it really happened. As a journalist for a very long time, I get it. He needed a second source on the resurrection.

The bad rap he's gotten over the millennium for his "doubts" is unfair. Here's a great secret I learned in my journey to priesthood: plenty of priests, more than you might imagine, have doubts and questions about the faith we celebrate. And we are a faith that embraces questioning and doubt and encourages us in living the questions. Curiosity and doubt keep faith alive.

As author and theologian Frederick Buechner wrote:

Whether your faith is that there is god or that there is not a god, if you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it moving, awake and moving.

So I look at Thomas with gratitude and admire his courage in speaking his very inconvenient truth. He had no guilt or shame about resisting someone else's reality and going along with a majority view he could not, with integrity accept.

What's not to love about celebrating the resurrection? I revel in the trumpets, flowers, hymns, pageantry and pure unaltered joy of Easter.

But we all know that living into the resurrection is something else indeed, and that's what Thomas has to teach.

It is Thomas' curiosity, or doubt; call it what you will, that leads him into the wounded flesh of Jesus. Jesus is sacrificed for us, but it is Thomas, who makes it real, pushing his fingers into Jesus flesh and wounds, a gruesome image.

Jesus meets Thomas where he is, without criticism or judgement. He is unfazed by Thomas's need to know. How easy it would have been to be dismissive. Jesus welcomed all of Thomas, just as he welcomes all of you and all of me. We have nothing to hide, but how often we do. But that's on us, not Jesus.

Show me a church that wants to shut down doubt and questioning and I'll show you a church that wants to preserve its power and control. How often do I hear in the hospital, "I know I shouldn't question God." But we maim our faith when we fail to wrestle with our questions, our doubts.

We realize now there was nothing weak in Thomas' faith. It was, in the end, quite robust. We realize now that Jesus' wounds have everything to teach us. Yes, the resurrection leaves us awestruck. But think how different our faith would be if the story ended there. Thankfully, it doesn't.

Writes Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest:

God uses the very thing that would normally destroy us—the tragic, the sorrowful, the painful, the unjust deaths that lead us all to the bottom of our lives—to transform us. There it is, in one sentence. Are we prepared to trust that?

A Christ with us in our wounds and brokenness. That's the Jesus I need. What most of us fear I think is not suffering as much as suffering alone.

A woman I know realized, as her child was dying, knew Christ with her. It transformed everything. Because she understood in her bones, that if God was willing to enter our suffering, and hers alone was catastrophic, then God's love for us was beyond imagining and she went on, in time, to become an Episcopal priest.

None of this go through life unscathed. We all carry scars, hidden, visible, and real. And yet resurrection still happens. Debie Thomas expresses it this way in Journey with Jesus:

When Thomas's doubts meet Jesus's wounds, new life erupts, faith blossoms, and the doubting disciple becomes an apostle of the good news. Resurrection happens all over again.

It is Easter Sunday today in Ukraine where over 60 percent of the country is Eastern Orthodox. Two days ago, President Zelensky, a Jew, said that Good Friday was "one of the most sorrowful days of the year" for Christians, a "day when death seems to have won but then he said he added, But then he added, "We hope for a resurrection."

This year, especially, may the resurrection of Jesus Christ stir up in us new life, not despite the endless body bags and savagery, not despite our wounds but because of them. AMEN

Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC

Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus 4/12/20

Richard Rohr Daily Meditation: 4/21/22