

TALKING WITH THOMAS (Chapel)

John 20: 19-31

[Second Week in Easter, Augsburg University Chapel, 22 April 2020]

I'm trying to imagine the disciple Thomas being interviewed by a modern-day TV talk show host – say, Oprah... “OK, Thomas, what gives here with your behavior?” “Well, Ms. Winfrey, it's really quite simple. I missed a meeting and all of a sudden my fellow disciples are trying to tell me that our leader, who all of us saw hanging on a cross, has shown up behind closed and locked doors. I'm sorry, Oprah – I'm a good sport and a faithful disciple – but this was too much for me – I just couldn't accept this without some evidence. I needed to touch the man before I could get on board. Certainly your audience would agree with me that this was not asking too much?” To which the audience would respond with sincere “Amen”s, empathizing with poor Thomas. And perhaps we might add our own Amens. I know that on many days I would. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” – but is it really that simple?

As many of you know, my 19 year old son and 1st year Auggie is named Thomas – a not insignificant fact to me – and there have been many days that Thomas's fresh and clear-eyed challenges to what I and his mother (and countless other adults) ask him to accept as gospel strike me as fitting and healthy. Maybe Thomas – both the disciple and my son – ask the questions that the rest of us don't have the courage to ask. Maybe they remind us that our faith journeys in this world are shaped, not so much by blind allegiance, but by seeking answers to the questions that nag at us about what God intends for us, what God is doing in our midst, and what we are called to do in response to God's reign breaking in to our lives.

Perhaps, especially in this pandemic time, they remind us that the world can be a scary place and that the way of faith is not about making things easier, but about finding the courage and will to work to overcome the fear. Perhaps asking our questions is how faith grows so that God's work might be done in the world.

I am struck by the fear that is evident in these stories we read in the days after Easter. Can we imagine what it was like for the early faithful whose leader had been killed like a common criminal? I think maybe we can understand the fear because it remains such a force in our personal and social lives in the 21st century.

Think about the fear that is gripping our public lives these days. How many times do we need to hear from elected officials about who we can trust or not trust to guide us through these uncharted times? How often must we be reminded about race and gender and class as personal liabilities? How will we ever deal with the various intimations of disaster from within and without that are thrown in our path as evidence that we can't trust, that we dare not forget to be vigilant, that we will not survive?

Where are the voices of civility and trust, the wise and calm counsel, the shouts of affirmation and hope, the dreams of a better life, a more just society, a sense of what is possible?

Or what about the fear that is so present in our relations to our neighbors around the world? As you probably know, just before the pandemic I spent several days at our CGE site in Cuernavaca, Mexico. It is a remarkable place and our staff there is so skilled at introducing their many students and visitors to real people, living meager economic existences. And as we meet these fellow global citizens, we also learn of the many ways in which the policies of our own country, too often based in fear of losing economic power or world status – our corporate fears – have contributed mightily to the state of these good people.

Where are the voices of global fairness and equity, the shouts of empowerment and love, the will to believe that abundance is possible when we learn to share our vast resources?

And there is the fear in our own neighborhood and campus community. Especially now, when we must keep our distance from each other, it is so easy to withdraw into our own silos and to believe that I am alone in this fight. Our many fears – of will I get sick, what's next for me, who can I trust – leads us to hoard what we have, to refuse to believe that the good of the entire community might be worth pursuing, to criticize those whose efforts are aimed at making us all stronger.

Where are the voices of responsibility and vision, the shouts of commitment and action, the foresight to see our ways together into a remarkable future?

This post-Easter fear is so much a part of our lives that sometimes we are unable to see how it blinds us to its implications, paralyzes us from taking a stand, creates obstacles to activism and change, keeps us ever fearful and unable to see how we might work together to do God's will in the world.

But today is different as we come together as God's people in this place, to take an important stand at this time; to proclaim that this community will not live in fear; that we will not give in to those who would tear apart rather than build up our lives together. Today we proclaim that ours is a community of hospitality for our fellow travelers in the journey of faith, asking our tough questions together, seeking to know God's will for our lives, committed to doing God's work in the world. And we will not be afraid.

And here comes Thomas, the absent and doubting disciple, looking for evidence. Here, too, is Peter, who denied that he knew Jesus three times. And here are the others who ran away in fear as the cross was lifted on that fateful hill. Here is a room full of disciples – not unlike all of us – flawed, anxious, seeking, but also present, listening for a call, recognizing the gift, ready for a promise. And here is Jesus the Risen Christ, in our midst, with nary a word of condemnation (what's with you guys, he might ask?) Instead these words of comfort and redemption for all of us who live in fear: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Thanks be to God! Amen.