

I had a conversation with the Dean of my seminary a few years ago at a protest, and he said something that has returned to me during this Easter season.

He said “Because of the resurrection, we do not have to do things the way we have always done them.” It was a casual remark, I don’t even remember the exact topic of the conversation that led to it. But the message found its way straight into my heart, and I found myself hearing it again as I read today’s gospel passage. Because of the resurrection, we do not have to do things the way we have always done them.

Before the resurrection, crucified men always stayed dead. Before the resurrection, people did not enter rooms through locked doors. Before the resurrection, seeing was believing. That was the way we had always done things.

The disciples were afraid. They were afraid because their leader had been murdered by the authorities, and they might be next. They were afraid because Mary Magdalene had told them something unbelievable, and they did not know what it meant. They were afraid, they were alone, they were grieving. Who can blame them for locking the door?

When Jesus came to them, they did not understand. When he came among them, and greeted them in the name of peace, they were speechless. Only when Jesus showed them his wounds, proof of the death he had died for them, did they see and understand. So why is it that we fault Thomas for asking for the same? We call him doubting Thomas, we identify with him, we hope not to be him. All he asked was to see and feel Jesus, as the other disciples had, that he might also believe as they did.

Thomas said to them “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.” It is easy now, two thousand years removed from the moment, to say that he should have believed. It is easier still to say that we too struggle to believe in what we do not see. This is the way we have always done things.

Thomas did not deny the resurrection of his Lord out of anger, or fear, or disdain.

Thomas’s denial comes out of grief. His beloved friend and teacher, the man he thought would be his king and his messiah, had been brutally murdered in the sight of all. The hope that Jesus might still come among them is too sweet to bear, too good to be true. “Unless I can see him again, unless I can touch him again, I will not believe.” Thomas is no obstinate unbeliever. This is no denial for denial’s sake. Thomas is not playing devil’s advocate. Thomas is guarding his broken heart.

In the depths of grief and despair, it is hard enough to bear the truth of loss. To Thomas, the suggestion that the loss is not real, or not what he thinks, must feel like the final blow. It must hurt even more, because of how much he wants it to be true. Thomas wishes with his whole heart to believe his friends, to believe Mary, to feel the fire of hope rekindled within him. And so he lashes out, makes demands, prays for proof that someone he loves is not truly lost to him forever. And Jesus hears him.

The story of Thomas and Jesus is not one of rational arguments and rebuttals. Jesus did not appear to Thomas to reproach him. Thomas cried out in grief and despair, and Jesus joined him in it. Jesus returned to the house with the locked doors to be with Thomas, his friend. He offered Thomas what he asked for, he held out his wounded hands to him. Death and locked doors and unbelief do not keep Jesus away from the people he loves. His resurrection means that we do not have to do things the way we have always done them.

Thomas never reaches for the hands he had demanded to touch. He never puts his hand in the wounded side. Instead, Thomas the unbeliever shouts for joy, confessing Jesus to be God. His is the refrain of Mary and the other disciples, I have seen the Lord! We join him in it as we say The Lord is Risen Indeed, Alleluia! The resurrected Christ came to speak personally with someone who had put walls around his own heart as well as his body. Because of that, thank God, we know that Jesus will reach us too.

When we encounter moments of doubt, when we sink into unbelief, seeking any other explanation than the good news of Christ, we might hear Jesus' words to Thomas as a reprimand. We might hear the words aimed at us. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." But we must recall something simple, yet crucial. We are those who have not seen. We hear the word of the Lord read and proclaimed. We bend over backwards, even trying new and uncomfortable things to be in relationship and fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray. We do not see the risen body of Christ with holes in his hands and a gash in his side standing before us, speaking to us in the name of Peace. And yet we come to believe. And yet we come to find him,

always finding us. Locked doors, locked hearts, even locked minds cannot hold him away from those he has died for.

Because of the resurrection, we do not have to do things the way we have always done them. We do not have to use the tensions of our belief and unbelief to build walls between us and God. Christ will walk right through them anyway. Neither do we have to prove our faith superior by our overcome doubts, by the dark nights of our souls which have led us to a new life in Christ. Jesus has been there since the beginning, wounded hands outstretched, patiently waiting for us to take them. "My Lord and My God!" Thomas greeted the risen Christ in joy and wonder. May we say the same, walking by faith in the light and Peace of Christ.