
Finding Faith in the Voice of the Risen Christ

An Evensong meditation by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Second Sunday of Easter – Year C

It is the Second Sunday of Easter, which means we are hearing again the now familiar story of Thomas demanding proof that Jesus has been raised from the dead. After missing Jesus' first appearance to the disciples, Thomas wants to see and touch the wounds that Jesus suffered when he was crucified before he will believe that his Lord is still alive. Jesus appears to the disciples when Thomas is present and, after inviting Thomas to do just what Thomas said he needed to do to believe, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

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There is a detail in the story of Thomas that is easy to miss, notwithstanding all the times we have heard it.

When we think of "Doubting Thomas," we often picture him touching the wounds of Jesus — reaching out his hand to probe the marks of crucifixion.

The story doesn't say that, though.

The story doesn't say that Thomas ever touches Jesus.

I don't think Thomas ever touched Jesus because he didn't need to do it.

He wasn't restored to his relationship with Jesus by anything he saw or touched.

Thomas was restored by what he heard.

Jesus spoke. Thomas recognized the voice of God and responded.

Thomas found his faith in the voice of the risen Christ.

You can see this same dynamic in all the post-resurrection appearance stories. Hearing is more important than seeing.

Take the story of Mary Magdalene looking for Jesus' body outside the empty tomb. She sees someone that she mistakenly thinks is the gardener. That is, her eyes — her sight — fail her. But, when the man that she thinks is the gardener calls her by name, she knows instantly that it is Jesus. It is the tender voice of someone who knows her and loves her. It is a voice she knows well.

The same thing happens in the story of the disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They mistakenly think that he is a stranger. Luke tells us that their eyes are "kept from recognizing him." But, when the man that they think is a stranger speaks, explaining all of scripture to them, their hearts burn with them. When they break bread later, they realize that the stranger was Jesus.

Once you have seen the importance of hearing in these other stories, it's easier to recognize it in the story of Thomas. While Jesus does offer Thomas the visual and tactile proof that Thomas thought he wanted. Jesus says, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

As it turns out, what Thomas wanted was not what he needed. He needed to hear Jesus' voice. He needed to hear the voice of the one who knew him and loved him.

Thomas reacted immediately, not by reaching out but by crying out, "My Lord and my God!"

Thomas found his faith in the voice of the risen Christ. He heard what Jesus had to say, and he responded immediately.

We too are called to follow Jesus. It's not that finding fresh ways of seeing is not important. It is. We often talk about learning to see the world the way that God sees the world.

It's just that learning how to listen to God with what St. Benedict called "the ear of the heart" is often a prerequisite to our awakening to a new way of seeing. Listening requires surrender. We can't grasp things the way we can when we see them. We can't stay in control. We are forced to accept a deeper level of vulnerability. We are drawn into a relationship with the voice that is speaking to us. We learn to trust that God does not speak a word without meaning and we yearn to know what it is.

Just think about what we are doing right now.

We came here to listen to the beautiful canticles and anthems of a choral evensong service. We can participate in the beauty of the music, but we can't completely grasp it. We can't control it just because we can read the musical score as it appears on a piece of paper. We must stay open to the performance. We must surrender to it. We must let it move over us and through us, stirring up thoughts and feelings that we can't predict or even control.

This is how faith works too.

Seeing, while important, is not as important as hearing. We have a way of wanting to possess what we see, but hearing has a destabilizing character that can be helpful. This is particularly true, as the post-resurrection appearance stories demonstrate, when we are dealing with either a wound or wonder, or both. The passive, accepting posture of hearing puts us in a better place to deal with what's in front of us. We are less likely to want to grasp and control it and more likely to be able to discern God's presence in it, if for no other reason than that we are more likely to be aware of our inner stirrings that are caused by it without analysis.

The habit of discernment is often described as attitude of listening to God in all of life. It fine-tunes the ear of the heart so that we hear more clearly the invitations to love intrinsic to every moment of life. Yet, once we gradually come to know what love demands, we find that we are free to see in new ways and to respond in new ways.

I don't think that it's a coincidence that Thomas is said by tradition to have founded churches as far away as Persia and South India and is also credited with an apocryphal gospel.

In the end, faith is about listening for what Jesus has to say and responding to it.

The story of Thomas helps us to know what to look for.

We are looking for a Word that says:

"Peace be with you."

We are looking for a Word that says:

"You are my beloved."

We are looking for a Word that says:

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

When we find ourselves doubting, when we struggle with what we cannot see, the invitation is not to strain harder for proof, but to listen more deeply.

Like Mary Magdalene, we will know him when he speaks our name.

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we will feel our hearts burning inside of us as he explains the

meaning of the scriptures to us.

Our hope is that, like Thomas, we will find ourselves crying out, "My Lord and my God!" -- not because we have touched his wounds, but because we have heard his voice.

Our hope is that we become an answering echo of the Word that calls us into life.

Amen.

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