

# *my lord and my God!*

a sermon preached on the  
*second sunday of easter*

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by the reverend colleen clayton*

the lections: Acts 5: 27-32; Psalm 118; Revelation 1: 4-8; John 20: 19-31

I wonder, when you first hear or see something, how do you respond? Do you immediately begin to process it in your mind, seeking to make sense of it? Maybe you are someone who is flooded with images, details captured in sharp, mental snapshots? Perhaps it is your heart that skips a beat, pounds rapidly or feels as though it will burst? Are you someone whose response stirs in your gut?

Perhaps the answer is that it depends, on what has happened.

Personally, I often find that my head takes some time to catch up with my heart. I tend to feel things first and only later make sense of them in my mind. In fact, there are some things, that I find I can only grasp at the wordless level of the heart. Beautiful things like love and friendship, faith, and my sense of God's call to me, as well as tragic, terrible things like last week's bombings in Sri Lanka and the ongoing violence that has flowed from those attacks.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear about Thomas struggling to get his head around the story of Jesus' resurrection. *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* (John 20:25b). It sounds as though Thomas needed to see and touch something physical before his mind could accept what the other disciples had told him about Jesus. Perhaps the combination of love and horror that Thomas had just experienced needed something beyond words, something that could only make sense to him if he could experience it in his body.

Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the other disciples and the story of his resurrection seems so unlikely that when he hears it, Thomas rejects it. Although this has earned him the derogatory name of 'Doubting Thomas', I think that his honest statement of disbelief is a courageous place to begin. Thomas will not go along with the crowd and simply pretend to believe. He demands to know in his very self if what he has heard is true.

To me, it is as if he is saying, "Do not play with me by telling me tales of such nonsense! Is it not enough that I have lost him once, don't try to make me believe the impossible. I cannot bear to risk believing again in something that may not be true. Something that might mean I lose him again. Before I can trust once more, I need to know that this is real."

I think many people know what it is like to have been hurt so much that it feels almost too painful to risk hope. Perhaps those people can understand and empathise with Thomas's desire for proof.

Certainly Jesus appears to understand his need. Later, when he meets up with Thomas, he does not tell him off for his lack of faith, he doesn't object to the intimate demands of proof that Thomas has asked for. He simply says to Thomas, *Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe* (John 20:27).

The Gospel doesn't tell us whether or not Thomas did touch Jesus' wounds. His immediate response to Jesus' invitation was to say *My Lord and my God!* (John 20:27) so the sense is that he probably didn't. However, something very powerful took place in that exchange with Jesus; something that took Thomas from a need for physical proof to an announcement of the most profound belief. This extraordinary transition seems to have taken place through Jesus' willingness to make himself vulnerable to Thomas, to allow his wounds to be seen and touched.

Now I don't know about you, but when I am hurt, usually the last thing I want to do is show my wounds to others. This is the same whether the damage is physical or emotional. My instinct is, like an injured animal, to find somewhere quiet to go and lick my wounds, to allow myself the time to heal before I face the world again. I certainly do not want to allow anyone to come and have a good poke at the places that hurt, to check out the size and depth and rawness of the marks of my pain. And yet this is what Thomas asks for and what Jesus so generously allows. Jesus is prepared to let Thomas become intimately involved with his suffering and pain in order that Thomas might be healed.

This is the powerful invitation of this interaction. Understanding and empathy for others often comes through a recognition of shared brokenness. We don't need to have had exactly the same experience, the knowledge and acceptance of our own pain allows us to imagine the pain of those around us. And often, it is the generosity of the one who is hurting that provides the way into this understanding.

Sometimes, against all instincts, it is only when we have the courage to allow ourselves to expose our hurts to others, allow them to touch our rawness, to feel the destruction that we have experienced, that they can know and understand and move forward.

This is hard. It involves risk, trust and the discernment of what can helpfully be shared. It is certainly not an invitation to allow ourselves to be open to others intentionally inflicting pain on us. Sadly, there are some people with whom we cannot trust our vulnerable selves. There are those who seem only able to use our woundedness as a weapon against us and it is important to protect ourselves from such people. However, this Gospel story also shows us that sometimes, as we are willing to allow others to see and touch our wounds, the love of a God who seeks us through vulnerability can use that pain to allow healing and transformation take place.

The wounds of Jesus matter to this story. The peace that Jesus brings to his disciples is dependent on him having triumphed over the world and death through his self-sacrificial love. As the prophet Isaiah says, *He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed* (Isaiah 53:5). This the basis for the peace and joy that Jesus gives to the disciples; a peace that cannot be taken away.

The love that is prepared to suffer, the love that will allow others to touch the marks of woundedness, the love that brings lasting peace, this kind of love is the complete opposite of the violence and retribution that we saw so horrifically played out in Sri Lanka on Easter Day and that since brought about more deaths. The message of those bombings was that hurt must be paid for with more hurt. It is a message that destroys and that can only be ended when revenge gives way to the understanding of shared pain.

Although Thomas' honest statement of disbelief was a good place to start, he cannot remain there. The disciples are to go into the world bearing the self-sacrificial love of Jesus and sharing his peace with the world. They are to go into the world with the courage to meet violence with God's peace so that all might be healed.

Jesus says to Thomas, *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe* (John 20:29). These words bring comfort and challenge to each of us. There are times when the brokenness of the world make it seem impossible to believe in a God of goodness and power. But perhaps today's Gospel reading gives us a clue that it is in this very brokenness that we learn to

believe. As we touch the woundedness in ourselves, in others, in our world, somehow, in a way that perhaps can only be understood in our hearts, we can come to know and experience the love and peace of a God who chooses vulnerability over power, and life that comes through death.

In closing I would like to pray with you a World Council of Churches prayer from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

When everything around seems to be collapsing into injustice and chaos  
Creator God, teach us to love you  
and to recognize that you hold the earth gently in your hands.  
When we do not know just what to do and where to turn,  
teach us to trust your wisdom,  
so that we can discern your presence in events around us.  
When we become unforgiving and vindictive,  
teach us to grasp your tenderness,  
and forgive us for all we do wrong.  
When violence, fear and hatred seem to overtake us,  
teach us to receive your compassion,  
and steer our lives in the ways of justice and peace.  
When we think we can go it alone,  
teach us to depend on your grace,  
so that with patience and persistence we can transform the world.  
But most of all,  
teach us to appreciate your goodness,  
for in you we have new life!  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A prayer by Aruna Gnanadason, India, WCC coordinator for Justice, Peace and Creation.  
<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/prayer-cycle/india-pakistan-sri-lanka>