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Easter 2B
Peace, Seattle
April 8, 2018
John 20:19-31

SEEING THE RESURRECTED CHRIST ANEW

The 3-year cycle of readings gives shape to our worship life throughout each year, with the notion that each of the four different portraits of Jesus will have its opportunity to shine.

While we're currently in the Year of Mark, during Lent and Easter we get a healthy dose of John's gospel. And every year on the Second Sunday of Easter we hear this text from the 20th chapter of John.

Through the centuries interpretations of this story have been nearly as focused on THOMAS as they have been on the RISEN JESUS. Thomas's refusal to believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead without first seeing the evidence with his own eyes has endeared him to all sceptics.

His reluctance is also a vehicle for addressing the needs of the generations of Christians who would never have the opportunity to know Jesus in the flesh, which includes you and me. In effect, the story says, DOUBT can be a legitimate stage on the path to a more mature faith and trust in God.

The scene of Thomas' comeuppance is a favorite in the history of renaissance art.
In Rembrandt's portrayal[1] of the scene, the risen Christ stands at the center of an otherwise pitch dark room, the light emanating from his white robed, light-skinned body illuminates the scene.

Surrounded by eleven male apostles and Mary Magdalene, Jesus lifts a fold of his robe to reveal to the white-bearded and astonished Thomas the bright red wound in his side. While other figures lean in, Thomas leans back, hands in the air, in a posture of shock and surprise.

In the depiction by Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens',[2] **the scene is narrowed.**
Three apostles become stand-ins for the rest. A muscular Jesus, uncovered to the waist, holds out his wounded hands while gazing intently at Thomas—who again is caught in a posture of surprise.

The Thomas we meet in Rubens' painting is a much younger man than the two other wizened apostles with whom he shares the canvas, as if to say youthful indiscretion is partly to blame for Thomas's lack of faith.

But it is Caravaggio's[3] **portrait of the scene that is the most intimate and visceral of all.**
In it, Christ stands on the left, his head bent downwards, his face in the shadows, while with his right hand he pulls back the edge of his linen robe, revealing his wounded side.

Three apostles cluster close around Jesus, their head, bending forward, nearly touch his; their eyes all focus intently on the wound.

Front and center is Thomas. But instead of recoiling backward, hands up, as in the portrayals of Rembrandt and Rubens, Caravaggio's Thomas comes closer, entranced by what he sees.
His body leans in; his forehead is wrinkled in astonishment; his eyes are wide open.

[1] 1606-1669 http://www.cruzblanca.org/hermanoleon/sem/a/pasq/2/08pascua.jpg
[2] 1577-1640 http://www.cruzblanca.org/hermanoleon/sem/a/pasq/2/07pascua.jpg
[3] 1571-1610 http://www.caravaggio.org/the-incredulity-of-saint-thomas.jsp

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His right wrist, in the grasp of Jesus' left hand, is being pulled by Jesus toward the wound—to the point where the tip of Thomas's index finger disappears into the wound itself.

This is no ethereal, no otherworldly Jesus! Caravaggio's portrayal says something powerful about a bodily resurrection, about the unity of flesh and spirit in the risen Christ, about Jesus' indulgent attentiveness to Thomas's need, and about what it means to be human.

> "When God gives of Godself," writes Richard Rohr, "one of two things happens: either flesh is inspirited or spirit is enfleshed...God's will is incarnation. And against all our expectations of divinity, it appears that for God, *matter really matters*...[4]
>
> "It's no accident," continues Rohr, "that [in] Luke's Resurrection account... Jesus [says], 'I am not a ghost! I have flesh and bones, as you can see.' [And] to Thomas he says, 'Put your finger in the wounds!' In other words, 'I am human!'—which means to be wounded and resurrected at the same time.
>
> "That Jesus' physical wounds do not disappear [after his resurrection] is telling...Jesus has not left the human sphere; he is revealing the goal, the fullness, and the purpose of humanity itself, which is 'that we are able to share in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4), even in this wounded and wounding world.
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> "Yes," Rohr concludes, "resurrection is saying something about Jesus, but it is also saying a lot about us."[5]

2nd century church Father Irenaeus of Lyon says it this way: [6]

> "The tender flesh itself will be found one day—quite surprisingly—
> to be capable of receiving, and yes, full capable of embracing the searing energies of God…
>
> For even at its beginning the humble clay received God's art,
> whereby one part became the eye, another the ear, and yet another this impetuous hand.
> Therefore, the flesh is not to be excluded from the wisdom and the power
> that now and ever animates all things.
> God's life-giving agency is made perfect, we are told, in weakness
> —made perfect in the flesh."

In the power of resurrection Jesus' scars do not disappear but are transformed from emblems of defeat and disfigurement to emblems of God's commitment to make this broken world whole.
For God, *matter really matters!*

Our mission as contemporary witnesses is not to flee from the world of flesh and matter, but to offer ourselves as instruments for its transformation by sharing in the risen life of Christ; a risen life that shows its unique particularity in every one of our messy, embodied lives.

Instead of shutting down Thomas or shaming him, Christ, knowing his need, invites Thomas closer. And because of this forbearance, Thomas' faith expands.

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[4] Adapted from Richard Rohr, Near Occasions of Grace (Orbis Books: 1993), 5-6. Also found in his 4/1/2018 email meditation, which can be found HERE.
[5] Adapted from Richard Rohr, Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self (Jossey-Bass: 2013), 84-85, 87. Also found in his 3/31/2018 email meditation, which can be found HERE
[6] Saint Irenaeus of Lyon (c.130-c.202) Adapted and translated by Scott Cairns, *Love's Immensity: Mystics on the Endless Life* (Paraclete Press: 2007), 5-6. Also quoted in Richard Rohr's email meditation for 4-2-2018, which can be found HERE.

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According to tradition, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Thomas began a ministry of sharing the good news that took him far beyond the limits of the Roman Empire.

He is thought to have traveled as far as southwest India with the good news. And to this day, along the Malabar Coast, there are still large numbers of believers who call themselves "Christians of St. Thomas."

Thomas is also the patron saint of architects, because he built so many churches. Not bad for a guy who was first labeled a "doubter."

And how about you and me, dear friends?
Is it possible for the risen One to turn our questions toward conviction? Is it possible for us to experience his presence not as condemnation but as acceptance, and an invitation to more fully embody his risen life within this life we share in community? **The answer is yes.**

And each time we accept Christ's invitation to come to his Table and to receive as gift this bread and wine, his body and blood, we eat and drink forgiveness and new life.

And more than that, we become conduits, supporters, mentors, teachers, to one another.
And Christ knits us ever more firmly into the fabric of a community which embodies grace in the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen.



The Incredulity of St. Thomas, by Caravaggio