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Easter 2C
Peace, Seattle
April 3, 2016
John 20:19-31

# FAILURE TURNS TO FAITH

"I have always wondered," writes Jose Luis Descalzo, "why the traditional lists of [14] works of mercy… did not include a 15th, 'encourage those who fail.'"[1]

Descalzo is addressing the educational tradition in which results from major exams carry great weight in determining final grades.

"I believe," he continues, "that a true parent or a true teacher…ought to be extremely demanding before examinations and extremely forgiving after them."

Encouraging children so that rather than getting bogged down with failure they turn it into an incentive to do better next time is the moral duty of parents and teachers, he says.

I wonder if Jesus didn't subscribe to the same pedagogical approach; because it seems to me that's what's going in this familiar post-resurrection story of Thomas the doubter.

**You know the story well.** It's evening on the very day that Mary had told the disciples I HAVE SEEN THE LORD! But this surprising, incredible news has not yet penetrated their thick skulls. So, instead of being caught up in the JOY of Jesus' resurrection, we find his followers trapped in this room, captive to their own fears, unable to spring free of the locks which bind them.

The locked doors are a metaphor for the mindset that keeps them from accepting the truth of Mary's Easter proclamation.

But then, Jesus stands among them, penetrates the fog of fear, and joy becomes possible once more.

**The first words from his lips speak of his intention.** Extremely demanding of them before he went to the cross, he is extremely forgiving afterward.

"Peace be with you," he says, and shows them his hands and his side.

**Thomas, of course, is not with them that night and misses out on the whole encounter.**

When he later returns, the disciples try their best to explain the experience they have had, but he won't accept their testimony. How do you communicate an experience you've had of the divine? Of God breaking through your defenses in such a powerful and tangible way? Words fail miserably…

**Unless I can see and touch the marks of the nails and put my hand in his side, says Thomas, I will not believe.**

Thomas doubts. But must we interpret his expression of doubt as a sorry lack of faith?

[1] Jose Luis Martin Descalzo, *Reasons for Hope*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) p. 133. Following quotes are also from the book's same chapter: *Encouraging Those Who Fail.*

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Theologian Paul Tillich, in his book Dynamics of Faith, claims that doubt is in fact an inescapable and essential part of faith. According to Tillich, faith is what happens when a finite being is "grasped by and turned to the infinite."[2]

Because we are limited in our understanding, there will always be things about the infinite nature and character of God what we cannot understand, try as we might. In Tillich's view, an unquestioning faith is no faith at all, because it shows a lack of engagement with the divine.

A questioning faith requires an element of risk—and courage. And "where there is daring and courage, there is the possibility of failure."

Sometimes, writes Shawnthea Monroe, we ask questions and receive no answer. Sometimes we ask questions and don't like the answer. These are the risks we take when we honestly engage the divine.

**In Thomas's case, though, the real risk is in success.** Does he really think Jesus will take him up on his demands? As a devoted follower, the suggestion that the dead Master has returned seems like a fairy tale and his peers who believe it delusional.

**The truth is, the Easter story raises more questions than I answers.**
If true, the resurrection has implications that are mind-boggling. If Jesus has been raised, he's not just another wise sage and champion of the oppressed, he is the Christ, the Son of God, and he might expect a good deal more of his followers now than he did when he was with them!

**It may be that Thomas understands the risk here quite clearly.** Whatever the case may be, as a sign of his continuing connection to the community of Jesus, Thomas does not abandon his brothers and sisters, but remains with them—even if they are delusional!—so that, one week later when Jesus appears again, Thomas is there this time to experience Christ's presence with them.

**How will the Teacher treat this pupil after the exam?**

Addressing Thomas directly, Jesus invites him to do that very thing which Thomas had claimed he must do: feel Jesus' wounds with his own fingers; reach out to touch his wounded side.

Interestingly enough, the gospel writer doesn't tell us whether Thomas actually did what he said he must do, or whether the invitation to do so was enough for him.

**How are we to understand Jesus invitation here? What kind of inflection did his voice carry as he addressed Thomas? Were his eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed with judgment of Thomas? Was his face full of compassion and tenderness?**

**I like to believe that Jesus, as a good teacher who'd been extremely demanding before these trials was extremely forgiving afterward. And that this, for Thomas, made all the difference.**

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.

[2] I'm borrowing heavily on this page and the next from Shawnthea Monroe's *Reflections on the lectionary* article in *Christian Century*, March 16, 2016, p. 23. She provides quotes from Tillich.

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**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 doubter.

**And how about you and me, dear friends?**
Is it possible for the risen One to turn the doubts we have toward conviction? Is it possible for us to experience God's presence not as condemnation but as acceptance? Not as demand by forgiveness?

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.

This is our vocation. Thanks be to God!

Amen.