

Wearing Our Holes

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he 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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

We left the tomb last week with alleluias and wonder and said so many times to each other, "He is Risen!"; some of us even believed it. It was like that with the disciples too.

This week's text brings us to the story of doubting Thomas. Scripture doesn't call him that, but we have for years and years. We assign him this role of the one who gets into the 12 just by the skin of his teeth because he needed too much proof. And when we hear Jesus tell him that his faith was enough, but not quite as blessed as those who don't get visual proof of the risen Christ, well, we can pat ourselves on the back a little, since we haven't seen, we have only heard and read and then said those words in faith, "He is Risen!" And we shove any doubts we have about the whole process deep inside because somehow we hear that doubting is dangerous to faith.

I'm not sure that's so, and I know at least some of you aren't either, because we have been leaning into this text all week in discussion and study. And the consensus seems to be that Thomas gets a bad rap, but we have trouble putting our finger on why.

Presumably Thomas had heard the stories. Mary told the disciples she had seen the Lord. Peter saw the empty tomb and the grave clothes lying there, folded up, as if Jesus wanted them ready for the next body to come along. Some of them believed, although maybe a little tentatively it seems. Because the night of the resurrection, the night they learned Jesus was on the loose, the night they began to hear rumors that there was something afoot that bested even the worst that could happen, the disciples are hiding out behind locked doors. They aren't spreading the news.

They aren't out looking for Jesus. They aren't celebrating with a grand dinner Jesus-style. But Thomas isn't with them.

We don't know where Thomas is. Maybe he was just as scared as the rest and kept on running right out of town. Maybe he was teaching everyone he could grab hold of those words that would echo through the centuries, "He is Risen!" Maybe he didn't go online that day and missed the secret facebook invitation to hole up where they were safe and could predict what might happen within the four walls of a locked room. Maybe he was there, but was brave enough to be the one to step out and get some take-out. Maybe he was just taking a cigarette break.

He missed it. It is the second appearance in John's gospel of the risen Christ and seems to confirm what Mary had been babbling about and Peter dared to begin to believe. *He is Risen!* They were afraid, they were hiding, they had no clue what to do with this new news, and Jesus comes through the locked door and says, "Peace be with you."

Apparently there was a little bit of shock or hesitation, because there were no rousing alleluias at the sight of Jesus. So he shows them his hands and his sides, still marked with the brutality of the crowds, of which they were a part. Only then do they rejoice and seem to recognize him. And he says to them again (because they must have been freaked out), "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, I send you."

And when Thomas gets the news, he realized that he missed the main event! Has that ever happened to you? You miss the celebrity sighting, the firework finale, or the key scene in the movie because you took a bathroom break?

When I was about 8, my mother and my aunt did a very brave (or stupid) thing. They took six cousins – four of them younger than me – to Seaworld for the day. It was a grand trip, made better by being with family and the not too warm, but sunny spring day. And apparently I was enjoying it and wandered off and before I knew it found myself surrounded by strangers – hopelessly lost. I don't know if it was for 10 minutes or three hours, but it was terrifying. Finally a nice woman took me to some kind of station and my mother showed up (incidentally *not* in the blue coat I had described her as wearing, which made things all the more complicated). Everyone sighed with relief and we went on with our day. And on the way home, my mother asked us, as mothers often do to get some validation for their bravery and stupidity, what was the best part about the day? I paused, trying to decide what was best – seeing Shamoo, touching the dolphins, marveling at the barefoot waterskiiers.... And in that pause my brother and sister and all three cousins said, "getting orange juice while Kathleen was lost!" What? Having some orange juice while I was lost? That couldn't be it! No way!

I *knew* that the orange juice couldn't have been the highlight of their day, but maybe not for the reasons you think. I had no doubt that the rest of the kids were less worried about me being lost than my mother. I had no doubt that they barely missed me. I had no doubt that their fun went right on, since it wasn't so much about Seaworld as about being with cousins in the FL sun. BUT, I knew that none of us liked FL orange juice. I *knew* it because we had it every morning at my grandmother's house, when we picked the oranges right off the tree in the backyard, and carefully peeled them and fought over who would be in charge of the juicer. But none of us

drank a full glass. We turned up our noses at the thin juice that was filled with seeds and pulp, making our parents drink it. So I *knew* what FL orange juice was like, and so I also *knew* that drinking it couldn't possibly have been the highlight of their day. So I just couldn't believe what they were saying: what I knew about FL orange juice just didn't sync with the experience they were describing, so I doubted. I didn't believe them, and told them so. "You don't even like that orange juice, it couldn't have been that good, you're just being mean." And I started begging my mother to turn around and get me some. I had to taste it for myself. Stopping at the gas station to get some wasn't good enough, squeezing some fresh from the tree when I got home wasn't good enough, I was all of the sudden more thirsty for FL orange juice than I had ever been in my whole life.

Maybe that's the kind of doubt Thomas had. The kind that drives your thirst, that insists that you see and touch and experience for yourself.

"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."

"Unless I taste some of that Seaworld FL orange juice and know that it is somehow still fresh squeezed and FL's own, I'm going to go with what I know – that all of you love to pull one over on me. I'm no fool."

Unless I see some God in this God-forsaken world of hunger, war, and poverty, I can't believe that your God, whom you claim is gracious and good and loves us, is in charge.

Unless I can get some kind of sense that Jesus actually makes you a better person, that Jesus does anything for you except keep you from sleeping in on Sunday morning, I'm going to skip the whole church thing.

Unless I read something in that Bible of yours that I understand, or has meaning for my life, I'm going to assume that the whole thing is a pretty good story and all in all, a work of fiction.

Unless I hear some honesty about how you've really messed up your life, how you've gotten to the complete bottom of the barrel, you're going to have a hard time convincing me that God has somehow turned things around for you.

This kind of doubt insists on proof, it drives the thirst for connection between what we know and what we are being told; the kind that drives us to seek a new reality that is contrary to everything that we know, but somehow seems sweet, and real, and within reach. Thomas *knows* that Jesus was crucified. He *knows* that the nails went right through Jesus' arms and the sword pierced his side. The Jesus he *knows*, the one who ate and joked and cried with them, died two days ago.

Let's face it, it is an audacious claim – one they all seemed to formerly doubt, and now Thomas was the only one not on board. I like to think it was Thomas who gathered the disciples again in the safe house to wait for Jesus. Maybe he got them to go every day for a week, hoping that Jesus would make a repeat performance. Because it seems he was thirsting for something

beyond the truth he *knew*. He had to understand for himself that the dead Jesus he knew could actually be the risen Christ – not a ghost, or a common vision, or a wishful hallucination.

If Thomas didn't gather them in on his quest, it must have been a sorry lot. Because Jesus told them, "I am sending you." He has plans for them, similar to the ones the Father had for Jesus – to get on with the business of bringing in God's kingdom. So either they were trying their hardest to get Thomas on board and indulging his doubt, or they were, once again hiding out in fear, but this time with first hand knowledge of the amazing news, and instructions to go and live it. Which, on second thought, may describe their fear, since it seemed that being sent from God in the way that Jesus was eventually got him killed.

Anyways, there they are, right where they were a week ago, but this time Thomas doesn't budge – he doesn't go anywhere because Thomas is *thirsty*. And once again Jesus appears and does the same thing for Thomas that he did for the disciples. He shows Thomas his hands and his side. Jesus is gracious and patient enough with Thomas to give him exactly what he needed, exactly the same thing he did for the other disciples. But Thomas doesn't just rejoice, Thomas makes the most faithful and exalted recognition of Jesus in all of the gospels, "My Lord, My God!" Thomas sees and *knows now* that this is the Jesus he *knew*, the one who died. Thomas sees the scars he still bears in the new reality of a living, breathing Christ. And surely all he wants to do is drink it all in and ask Jesus a million questions.

But Jesus seems to break the spell, perhaps wondering why the other 10 are still in this room after he sent them out – he says, "Okay, enough, you've seen. I'm risen, but I'm also me, I'm still human. Now enough of this holy hands and side show. Can't you see I'm trying to show you something much bigger? Can't you see that I'm trying to show the whole world something and I've asked you to do it? Get going! You've seen! You are the lucky ones—all those others won't have the same privilege, so you've got to figure out how to make this good news believable. You're going to have to be brutally honest, you're going to have to lay aside all the doubts and fears and judgments of those who have trouble believing – forgive them their sin. You have seen now the worst part of me – the worst thing that has happened to me, and to you – my crucifixion. You're going to have to remember that you were the same; you have had awful things happen to you and you have done awful things – these holes are proof! You will have to wear your holes, tell them all the ways you've failed me so that they can see the way I've saved you. Now it's up to you.

John goes on to tell us in chapter 21 that Jesus came among them again and *still* they didn't recognize him. This Easter thing is gradual. This becoming a disciple thing takes some time. This living into the kingdom of God and sharing it with the world thing requires the bravery to remember – not only who Jesus is now, but who he was when you thirsted, when you were full of holes, when your doubt toppled your faith, what you *knew*.

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest who left the pastorate for academia. She found that the busyness of parish life and the role of pastor interfered with her quest to be fully human, which she repeatedly describes in her writing as an undeniably holy task. All of the praying and caring for people and being the Bible expert filled up her time so much that she didn't have time to quench that desperate thirst she had for Jesus. All the things she was *supposed* to do kept her

from doing the thing she was *made* to do, which was be in communion with God. She says this about doubt:

“Doubt often brings me to poke at what I believe, and when it topples, I realize that was an idol. And so doubt and disillusionment have been the divine gifts that have led me deeper into who God is.”

It seems to me that this is the kind of doubt we need. The kind that sends us to tackle the things we *know* are true with such persistence that they topple and we discover that what we *dare to wish* is true is indeed. One doesn't necessarily replace the other, but God's truth, God's son, God's good news that death is conquered, He is Risen! -- this new reality, claims it all.

We *know* that Jesus died. The disciples knew. Thomas knew. And when they dared to go to the tomb, when they kept hunting down rumors of this Risen Lord that were too good to be true, when they doubted what they dared to wish for, and when they were afraid, Jesus came to them, claiming his humanity, his holes, and with it theirs as well, and he dragged them into a new reality.

Let me tell you my current position on FL orange juice. I have never been back to Seaworld. I never got to taste for myself and know if my cousins and siblings spoke truth. But I no longer doubt. I know that vine-ripened oranges grown without pesticides in someone's backyard that are freshly squeezed into a glass – seeds and all – are intrinsically superior to frozen concentrate. I know that the experience that was described to me had some kind of real truth in it – surely the orange juice tasted better:

- They were safe and feeling taken care of and lucky to be together, while I was lost
- They were sweaty and tired and thirsty after a long day of running and waiting in line
- They were thrilled at the prospect of their own Seaworld juice in a shamoo cup, since my mother usually would pull something packed from home out of the backpack and pass it for all to share.

I *know* because trust me, this experience has stayed with me. I have considered the emotional, intellectual, psychological, and physical perspectives of their experience and have concluded that I did indeed miss out. I *know* because I have considered all those things and also now know that most of the world likes OJ fresh, not frozen. I *know* because they oooh and aaah when they see it squeezed in front of them. I no longer doubt.

But I'll tell you this: when I am in FL, and have the opportunity to sit down to a beautiful breakfast of fruit and pastries and the luxury of a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice served along with it without even being ordered, do you know what I do? I send it back and order a diet Pepsi. I don't doubt that it's good, that it's better fresh squeezed, that everyone else is loving it and surprised that I don't even want a taste. But the truth is, I no longer have any kind of thirst for it.

If doubt is what might drive us deeper into God,
If doubt drives our thirst for truth,
If doubt can show us that even *what we know to be true* can be an idol,

Then surely Thomas' quest can inform our own search for the Risen Christ.

Okay, Jesus has told us to give up on any hope for seeing his hands and his side with their holes that claim our humanity. That show is over – But let's not give up in our doubt.

- Let us hear the stories of others who have experienced the grace of God.
- Let us gather, even if we are sometimes fearful, and hope that because enough of us are praying, Jesus will show up.
- Let us know the people Jesus knew – the poor, the sick, the outcast – so that somehow we can meet him there.
- Let us look for him not only in the business of committees and the challenge of theological discourse, but in the eyes of a child, *with* the eyes of a child, who believes so easily but also wants to touch, and taste, and feel for herself.
- Let us read his Word not only with the discipline of habit, but with the thirst of those who desperately want to know the Risen Christ, holes and all.

And even if we don't quite get it, even if we are still a little afraid and unsure, even if we're not quite ready to be sent.....

Let us take our doubts and wear our holes and live into our humanity as we share our story, God's story, with the world.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. *Psalm 34.8*
Friends, let us never lose our thirst for the living God. Amen.

Reference:

“An Interview with Barbara Brown Taylor”, by Bob Abernathy, *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, June 7th, 2006.