

Do you remember being told by your parents that you couldn't do something, or you had to do something, and asking why and being told, 'because I said so'? Do you remember how infuriating that demand was? In Easter every year our Gospel readings are from John; and John's community is one of those places where 'because I said so' is taken *very* seriously. To be part of that community you really have to toe the line in believing what they tell you to: as this passage says, 'Blessed are those who haven't seen and believe anyway' – because we said so. But it doesn't seem to have worked any better for them than it did for you and me as children. We can see from the later letters to this community (the 1, 2 and 3 John that we find further on in the New Testament) that people simply aren't buying this 'reasoning'. John tries very hard to tell us that we can *trust* those who claim to be telling the truth – he insists on 'what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life'. But reading between the lines of these letters, we can see that even this degree of certainty is not making much headway against the competing versions of what Jesus is all about.

The scene, as we watch the disintegration of this group of Christians throughout these 3 letters, is sad and frustrating. It can hardly fail to remind us of our own world today, when truth – even eyewitness truth – seems to flounder and be overwhelmed in the tsunami of un-truth, conspiracy-theories, hate-filled lies, inundating social media and TV. John, the Elder, as he seems to be called, had to face so-called Gnostic propaganda that turned Jesus into a 'savior' like the heroes of the mystery-cults – apparently the craving for a superman who will lift us out of our everyday lives and make everything great (again?) wasn't invented in our own day. John says, 'this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us.' 'We declare to you' he says again and again, in the wan hope that repeating the message over and over might give it some traction. Hey, it seems to work with lies – the more you tell and re-tell them, the more people seem to believe them. Truth, however, has more integrity than that, and apparently less crowd-appeal.

The letters of John are a sad epilogue to the confidence we hear at the end of the Gospel, when this author says all this is written down 'so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, and, believing, you may have life in his name'. It's so neat and secure, so simple and profound. But the problems with making entrance into 'life' dependent on 'believing' something are all too clear in the later history of this community. Community itself can't be sustained by hoping that everyone will *think* exactly the way you do. You will end up booting out half of your 'brothers and sisters', or be booted out yourself (as the Elder apparently was) when the dissidents outnumber you – when the inmates, as the saying goes, take over the asylum. There has to be more to community life than correct belief.

Which is why the Elder goes on, in this and the later letters, to emphasise the need for community members to love each other. (The fact that this command extends only to 'each other' and apparently not to the world around them, is another part of the story of this group's demise, but that's for another sermon.....) Even a group so focused on belief eventually has to acknowledge the need for *evidence* to back up those beliefs. No amount of 'witness', even from eyewitnesses, can take the place of actual experience of the thing itself. You can spout 'God is love' till the cows come home; but unless the people you are talking to can actually *hear* and *see* and *feel* that love for themselves, you're going to have a very unreliable 'glue' to keep your group together.

The John-community apparently didn't take the lesson from the Thomas-story to heart. Thomas refused to just 'believe' because the people around him said so. (And good for him, I say.) What he wanted as a foundation for what *he* was willing to believe was *the sight of Jesus's wounds*. Is this a proto-Mel Gibson, reveling in the sight of the marks of torture? I don't think so. I think Thomas had to see the wounds so that he could know for sure that this Jesus was *not* one of those mystery-superheroes, who promise us a way *out* of the problems of this world – so he could know for sure that this returning non-hero was the one who had borne every detail of the horrors of human life, and gotten out of *nothing* that could hurt and destroy it. He needed to see the scars so he could dare to believe that the God he had only dimly suspected was real, was, in fact, real, and able to be with him in his own suffering and death.

If Jesus had wounds, then this man (who walked through a locked door to get to these guys) wasn't an impostor in

the human sense – that is, somebody pretending to be the person who had been crucified, somebody pretending to be Jesus. But even more importantly, if he had wounds, then he wasn't an impostor in the sense of somebody only pretending to be *God*. He was the in-the-flesh representation of the kind of love that would go to a cross for the sake of the beloved, the kind of love that *shows us what God is*, wherever it appears, and pre-eminently in Jesus's death, 'lifted up', as he always says in this Gospel, so that he could draw all to himself. That is the real lesson in the demand of 'doubting' Thomas; and it seems to have been a lesson that John's own community had a lot of trouble appropriating – trouble that, of course, has been shared by many another 'Christian' community down through the ages.

I think that Episcopalians are a church of Thomases. We're not good at 'because I said so'. We do take anybody, however they come to faith in Jesus Christ, wherever they are on that journey of faith; and we do have what I think is a healthy skepticism about 'I said so' – we like to be sure that both the 'I' and what is said is reliable. We tend to think that *faith* – which is to say *trust* in God, not just *belief about* God – has to be based on things that *can* be believed by reasonable people of good will, things for which actual *evidence* can be offered, not just on the 'I said so' of people long gone (about whose reasonableness we have very little information). This story may put Thomas down, but does show Jesus *giving* him the evidence he needs to believe what he's been told by others.

It's especially relevant for us because it reflects thought-processes typical of those who have found a home here, in this parish. The way our Church allows for honest doubt and honors requests for the *evidence* behind faith is, I think, fundamental to an adult faith, although that isn't very well-known, I fear, in the outside world. And I think that it's also behind the solidity of the faith that this parish itself has developed over the past many years – we have been asked to believe in miracles, but the miracles keep happening among us, providing all the evidence anyone could want that God is trustworthy, that faith is rewarded. Like Thomas, many of us started out uncertain about our possibilities for new life – quite a few so uncertain that they chose to leave our fellowship rather than undertake the risks that they could see ahead. But those of us who were left took some of those risks – little ones at first – and were rewarded with.... more risks! So we took those too – and have been rewarded with the joy of this beautiful place.

New life came in every time we took another step forward in faith. New life, new trust in God and in each other, proving that this letting God be in charge and trying to do only what he asks us to really *works!* We got new ways of being together in community; we got new ways of *thinking* – when were you last in a church where, when somebody says 'we've never done it that way before', it's meant as a *joke*? Our claims about Jesus's being raised from the dead are credible because we've seen resurrection. For us life brought out of death isn't a remote possibility, a pious hope: it's *history*. The power of the holy cross isn't mystical fantasy; it's happened, right here. Thomas sees the wounds, the scars, that testify to death; he sees the victim in front of him; he says, 'My Lord and my God!' because he can see that the person before him is the one he saw put to death and never expected to see again – but the scars defeat his expectation, introduce him to *hope* beyond *any* expectation. Telling our story requires the same thing, that we confess our own faithlessness, our own wounds and failures, and what God has made of them.

Trust in God doesn't come easily, not in Thomas, nor in us, nor in those outside of us. We're not going to be able to go out to a skeptical world and just say 'because I said so', still less 'because somebody 2000 years ago said so' – the skepticism about things written in books these days is pretty well-established (not as well as it needs to be, but still..). All the people who are able to believe things on those bases are already in some church that makes those claims – and they're *not* the people likely to come to us, or in need of doing so. The Thomases are out there waiting to be convinced. When the church is being the church, it introduces people to the notion of new life by *showing* it to them. They learn to believe in Jesus's resurrection by experiencing resurrection in their own lives, often by belonging to a *community* in which resurrection is daily reality – a bunch of people who expect God to raise the dead because they've seen it happen, in them and around them. We have been given the gift of seeing what we need to see – the scars, our Lord's and our own – and recognising in them how God's power works in and through the wounds of this world. We have been called to follow our Lord's own path of suffering and death (death to so many of our old ideas), through death to new life. We have been made ready by all this to follow his command, 'As the Father sent me, so I send you'.

Because, in the end, Easter is not about just us; it's also about 'them': the people out there who are also Thomases,

who are looking for a faith they can bring their minds and hearts to, without compromising their honesty or their experience. These are the ones who hear the story we have to tell – life out of death, hope out of despair, a Lord cast down and raised up again – and they say: Show me. And we can, because we have the evidence they need, the only evidence there has ever been for the resurrection: the Church – just the Church. That’s all there is; that’s all there’s ever been – a bunch of people who saw their hopes destroyed and then found them all again, who were utterly faithless to the best thing they ever had, and then were brought back to faith again; who were utterly defeated by the powers of this world and then were given courage to risk torture and death rather than betray their Lord again.

‘So I send you...’ Where? Out there. How? Just as you are, armed with the conviction you got in here from the evidence of your own eyes and ears. For what? To tell others what you have seen and known: ‘God is a God of life, not death. God wants this world to be just, and its people to be in fellowship with him and each other, and is prepared to suffer at their hands, even die, to demonstrate that. God longs to grant all of us – especially those who have known little joy – the joy of resurrected life. And if you want a taste of it, come and see for yourself, right now, right here.’

This Sunday is a day so prone to small church attendance that they call it ‘Low Sunday’. We may have gained 18 new members while we have been closed (I am not making this up, although my math is always suspect), but if we want those pews to be much fuller than before when we finally open up again, then we have to get the word out. It won’t be Carol out preaching; it won’t be advertising in the News-Journal; it won’t be some big splash of publicity, that convinces people to come in here and find new life – it will be the committed witness of all of you who have heard and known, who have touched with your hands and seen and understood God’s mercy to us all, that will touch the hearts of those who don’t know it. Jesus comes among us and offers us peace and assurance – and a commission. Wouldn’t it be just sheer bad manners (if nothing worse) to accept the peace, accept the assurance, and say ‘no, thanks’ to the commission? We have a job to do, dear ones, Easter people that we are, and we can’t wait a moment longer to do it. Your Lord and your God needs the love of his people as much as they need his love; let’s offer him the worship he deserves and them the chance at new life.