

Touching Life

Alleluia. Christ is Risen.

May we have the grace to live into the life of the Risen Lord.

Every year on this Sunday, we gaze into the mystery of the resurrection, Christ's Paschal mystery of dying and rising, through the story we just heard from John's Gospel. That story – and its main character beyond that of Jesus – is Thomas, virtually always known as Doubting Thomas. Poor guy. Which one of us would like being reduced to a simplistic, flat, cardboard cut-out character with a single (and not very attractive) adjective or adverb attached to our name. Bland Bill. Dumb-Jock Joe. Pretentious Patty. Hard-as-Nails Hannah.

As Chimamanda Adichie has reminded us so powerfully, there is danger in a single story, and just so there is danger in a single nickname that flattens a full-body-and-soul into a mere caricature.

So often Thomas is caricatured and looked down upon as someone who "just doesn't have enough faith" to believe in the risen Christ without seeing. As if somehow struggling with belief is all bad, and a failing foreign to most of us.

Or contrariwise, some folks in our time have made Thomas into a kind of proto-modern "science guy" hero, who rightly wants to test out all hypotheses by his five senses, and is ready to believe only after he conducts his own independent objective assessment of the evidence for the bodily resurrection of Christ.

But Thomas has long had another nickname that has led me to contemplate Thomas' nature and this story from an entirely different perspective. Because his name in Hebrew means "twin," Thomas has also been called Thomas the Twin, and various legends grew up around him and his name that suggested that Thomas looked so much like Jesus, that he was sometimes mistaken for being Jesus' twin.

And like so many twins, who have that almost supernatural sense of connection with one another that goes far deeper than skin to become a sort of full-souled link, I have sometimes wondered whether the Thomas we meet today is not so much a doubter, or a scientific trial and error researcher, but is more like Jesus' closest soul companion, a sort of twinned soul, and so is more devastated by Jesus' death than the other disciples.

What if Thomas' insistence "I must touch him to believe" is simply his needing to touch again this Jesus who – like a twin – carried the other half of his soul. Perhaps you have beheld yourself mirrored back to you by such a twinned soul. Someone who has beheld you in all your fullness – all

your glories and all your shortcomings – and mirrored you back so honestly, so lovingly, so utterly that it was with that one you knew yourself best. And felt most alive. And so perhaps you know the grief and trauma of being parted from one like this: your soul friend, your soul's twin? How can life go on if your soul is cut in half, severed from its root in that other who has carried so much of you?

And so I wonder: was it something like all this that was happening to Thomas in the days surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection?

What if Thomas was not so much a doubter, as one bereft of the touch of Jesus his rabbi, his soul-twin? And what if the loss of Jesus was not just the loss of Thomas' human companion and teacher, but was also the loss of all the hope that had come alive in Thomas in meeting and following Jesus. Thomas was the one, who when he asked where Jesus was going had been told by Jesus, so John's Gospel says, that Jesus himself was "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." [John 14:6] the very road into the heart of God. To lose Jesus meant that Thomas had lost his way. Had lost the soul-twin who opened to him the truth. And had lost life itself. No wonder he was so devastated, so traumatized and had so little soul strength, without Jesus, to risk believing, to risk trusting that there was still a way forward, still a door open into truth, and that life was still possible.

Death and all the little deaths – the traumas that shatter life as we would like it to be, and call into question the life we have believed was reliable and on which we have always depended.... When what had felt like solid ground has suddenly become shaky, and full of rifts opening at the soles of one's soul, what is one to do?

How does Thomas – how do we? – rebuild trust in the face of all that?

How do we – to use the words of today's collect – become reconciled to a new covenant with God and with life, when we don't want to let go of the old covenant of simple and reliable love we had assumed would never be shaken, and the old warm and reliable world we wanted to go on living in? What if we don't really want to accept the Paschal Mystery? What if we don't want to accept that God's way is not always a smooth way of life, but a way that includes – of necessity- suffering, loss, letting go, dying? How does Christ's dying and rising again make any difference at all, and form a foundation for reconciliation, and new life, new love, new hope?

We have all suffered this past year the loss of so much that we had depended on. So much touch that we had taken for granted and drawn life from. The touch and being mirrored back by loved ones. The touch and being mirrored back by co-workers and colleagues. The touch and being mirrored back by friends. The touch of hands with our brothers and sisters in Christ at the passing of the Peace in church. And in all this loss of touch, and being mirrored back to ourselves, we may have felt that we were losing touch with God as well, and the life we have known in our soul's twinning with Christ.

Is there a solution? A way, a truth, a life still available for us? And if there is, what are we to do to take hold of it?

Facing into loss is part of the mystery of the way God has structured reality. For the Paschal Mystery of dying and rising is not the truth just for Jesus, but for us and the whole world as well. The world and all life is a paschal mystery, patterned by dying and rising, over and over again. And so if that is God's way, God's truth, and the place where we are to find life, then paradoxically the starting point is learning to accept the holy reality that brokenness and loss are part of life.

The way of everlasting death is to cling to the way things were, have been, as if they are the only way things were meant to be. Instead of being open to the reality of the ever-shifting nature of life, and the rising of new life out of loss, and out of death.

Even the Christ, the God become one with us in our flesh, had to experience change and loss. Including the loss of friends and their companionship in his last night on earth; the loss of their kind and familiar touch, as their Last Supper was ending and the Christ was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane – the loss of dignity and freedom - and the illusion that the good guys and gals are always protected from such degradation - as he was unjustly put on trial, and finally the loss of all that we call life, as he died on the Cross.

Life is change, and always involves loss, and God in Christ embraced all that for our sake. Why? Simply to suffer? NO, to grant dignity to all suffering, and to teach us the way of letting go, the way that discovers that there is hope and life on the other side of suffering and loss, even as we resist the very suffering and loss that will take us into a new realm of living. What we Christians call resurrection is the way and the truth not just when we move into new life after death at the end of this life, but in the midst the myriad sufferings, and lettings go – small and large – that are part of day in and day out living into the Paschal Mystery: the mystery that God is just as present in the sufferings and losses, as God is present in the joys and moments of wholeness that we experience in the good times.

How do we come to embrace this? In this, Thomas is our example. Like Thomas, we must not deny the losses, or the feelings of anger and sadness that come with the losses of what we consider good and right, "the way things ought to be." Like Thomas, we should not pretend. Second, like Thomas, we need to cry out to God for what we need. "I need you to show up, Lord." I need you here in the midst of my loss. I need to know that the paschal mystery of dying and rising is not just about suffering and dying, but is also about new life and new hope on the other side. And like Thomas we need to admit that we need some trusted guide we can touch to get us to the other side.

And who are the trusted guides? The ones who – like Jesus – have been through the valley of the shadow and have come out on the other side, wounded, but trustworthy and alive. For these are the ones we trust, aren't they? Our trusted guides are not the strong ones who pretend never to have hurt

or suffered or gone through the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that haunt all human living. Instead we trust the ones who have gone the rocky roads ahead of us, and have emerged with hope and life on the other side. They are the trustworthy guides, the believable ones.

And that is why Thomas rejoices when he sees the Lord's wounds. Not out of some macabre fascination with the suffering. But out of a true joy in seeing that suffering, and even dying, can be met, and lived through, and emerged from with dignity and life and hope on the other side. Discovering that the tender love we have known in simpler times before trauma still exists as divine and tender love on the other side of trauma.

Perhaps we can see all this pictured for us in that wonderful story told by Dr. Richard Selzer, a surgeon and writer of consummate compassion, and Christlike insight. He says:

"I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth has been severed. She will be thus from now on. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks, "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says, "It is kind of cute." "All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.— [Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*]

Perhaps our way into the Paschal Mystery is to learn to trust that when our nerves are cut by pandemic, or trauma, or loss of any kind, that the Holy One will appear, whether in a locked Upper Room, or by our hospital bed, and will bend and invite us to touch his wounds, to show us that He has traveled before us the road we are traveling. And as he invites to touch Him and his wounds perhaps we may find there what he has found, life on the other side of loss. Finally, may we see Him bend low, as he twists his lips, and conforms them to kiss our crooked and crucified smiles, assuring us that life and love are still possible.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!