

John 20: 19-31

HOWARD THURMAN ONCE WROTE WE MARK TIME BY EVENTS AND GOES ON TO TELL A STORY OF THE SUMMER A BUS BROKE DOWN IN THE SMALL TOWN IN WHICH HE GREW UP. HE REMEMBERS THAT SUMMER BY THAT EVENT. ONE BY ONE, PASSENGERS FROM FARAWAY PLACES DISEMBARKED FROM A BROKEN DOWN BUS TO WANDER AROUND, STRETCH THEIR LEGS, AND GET SOME EXERCISE AS THEY WAITED FOR AND HOPED FOR ANOTHER BUS TO COME. THE STRANGERS STARED AT THE TOWNSPEOPLE AND THE TOWNSPEOPLE STARED AT THE STRANGERS IN MUTUAL CURIOSITY. THURMAN REMEMBERS DISTINCTLY WHEN TWO LADIES STEPPED OFF THE BUS. THEY STROLLED AROUND THE SQUARE FOR EXERCISE, AND THEN ONE OF THEM DID SOMETHING THAT HAD NEVER BEEN DONE BEFORE IN THAT SMALL TOWN SQUARE: SHE LIT AND SMOKED A CIGAR AS SHE STROLLED. SAYS THURMAN, "FROM THEREAFTER THAT SUMMER WAS REMEMBERED AS 'THE SUMMER THE LADY LIT A CIGAR IN THE SQUARE.'"

EVENTS MARK OUR LIFE AND OUR LIVES TOGETHER. OUR READING FROM TODAY'S GOSPEL SURELY HAD TO BE AN EVENT THAT MARKED THE LIVES OF THE DISCIPLES, PARTICULARLY THOMAS.

OF ALL THE CHARACTERS JESUS MEETS IN THE POST-RESURRECTION WORLD OF JOHN'S GOSPEL, NONE HAS LEFT A STRONGER MARK ON THE IMAGINATION OF CHRISTIANITY THAN THOMAS. MANY LOVE HIM. HE IS THE INCREDULOUS NONBELIEVER WHO HIDES INSIDE EVERY BELIEVING CHRISTIAN---THE QUESTIONER IN US THAT RESISTS EASY ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS OF FAITH, WHO ALWAYS WANTS A LITTLE MORE PROOF.

THOMAS'S DOUBT IN JOHN'S GOSPEL FAMOUSLY RENAMED THOMAS DOUBTING THOMAS. SOME WOULD SAY THIS STORY FROM JOHN GIVES INSIGHT TO WHO *THOMAS* IS, BUT I BELIEVE THE STORY SHOWS US WHO *JESUS* IS. IT IS HERE THAT WE FIND THE REAL POINT OF THE GOSPEL STORY—A STORY ABOUT GOD'S COMING TO US, WHEREVER WE MIGHT BE.

JOHN'S ANSWER BEGINS AT THE DOOR AT THE START OF THE STORY. INSTEAD OF DEPICTING A JESUS WHO OPENS THE DOOR, WALKS RIGHT UP TO THOMAS, AND STARTS TO ARGUE WITH HIM BY TRYING TO ANSWER HIS RATIONAL QUESTIONS OR ALLEVIATE HIS WORRIES, JOHN PAINTS A STARKLY DIFFERENT PICTURE THAT TELLS US MUCH ABOUT THE UNIQUE CHARACTER OF RESURRECTION FAITH AND ITS RELATION TO DOUBT.

JOHN TELLS US, FIRST, THAT JESUS WALKS THROUGH A CLOSED, LOCKED DOOR TO GET TO THOMAS. IT IS NOT THAT THOMAS'S DOUBT DRIVES *HIM* TO DEMAND ANSWERS FROM JESUS. IT IS *JESUS* WHO IS DETERMINED TO REACH THIS STAUNCH SKEPTIC, WHOM NO ONE ELSE SEEMS ABLE TO CONVINCED. IT IS JESUS WHO REFUSES TO LET DEAD BOLTS OR CHAINS BLOCK THE MOVEMENT OF LOVE TOWARD THE ONE WHO LACKS FAITH.

SO TOO IT IS WITH US. WHEN DOUBT CROWDS OUT HOPE, WE CAN BE CONFIDENT THAT JESUS WILL COME TO MEET US WHERE WE ARE, EVEN IF IT IS OUT ON THE FAR EDGE OF FAITH THAT HAS FORGOTTEN HOW TO BELIEVE. WHAT A STRANGE THING TO HOLD ON TO--- THIS CERTAINTY THAT ANSWERS TO OUR MOST PROFOUND AND DESPERATE QUESTIONS ABOUT LIFE COME NOT BECAUSE WE SEEK THEM WITH FOCUSED DETERMINATION BUT BECAUSE GOD COMES SEEKING US, STEPPING THROUGH THE WALLS THAT HARDSHIP BUILDS AROUND US, OFFERING LOVE AT THE VERY MOMENT THAT GRACE SEEMED NOTHING BUT AN UNLIKELY STORY TOLD BY NOT-TO-BE-BELIEVED FRIENDS.

IT'S ODD, ISN'T IT, THAT THOMAS DOES NOT JUMP UP IN SHOCK THE MINUTE JESUS ARRIVES, PARTICULARLY IF JESUS LOOKS LIKE HE DID BEFORE HIS DEATH, IF HE STILL HAS THE SAME CARPENTER'S HANDS, ROAD-CALLOUSED FEET, AND KIND SMILE THAT GRACED HIS FACE BEFORE THE CROSS TOOK HIM DOWN. AND THE SAME CAN BE SAID OF THE DISCIPLES WHEN JESUS CAME AND STOOD AMONG THEM. IT WAS ONLY AFTER JESUS SPOKE AND SHOWED THEM HIS HANDS AND HIS SIDE, DID THEY REJOICE.

DOES THIS MEAN THERE IS A GOOD CHANCE THAT WHEN JESUS COMES TO FIND US IN OUR DOUBT-FILLED WANDERINGS DURING OUR LOW-HOPE MOMENTS, WE, LIKE THOMAS, WILL NOT RECOGNIZE HIM RIGHT AWAY, EVEN WHEN HE IS TWO INCHES FROM US?

WE WANT TO KNOW CHRIST...TO BE FOUND , TO BE TOUCHED AND TO TOUCH GOD PERSONALLY. WE WANT TO RECOGNIZE HIM.

PERHAPS THAT'S ULTIMATELY WHY WE COME TO WORSHIP: SO WE CAN SEE AND RECEIVE THE GIFTS OF FAITH. PERHAPS THAT'S WHY WE BRING IT ALL WITH US...OUR PRAYERS, OUR HOPES, OUR UNCERTAINTIES. THE EVENTS OF OUR LIVES WE BRING TO CHURCH, BECAUSE WE WANT THEM MARKED BY FAITH. LIKE THOMAS, WE WANT OUR LIVES TO BE TOUCHED AND TO TOUCH THE HOLY. WE WANT THE GIFTS OF FAITH FOR OUR VERY OWN. THE RISEN CHRIST FOUND THOMAS. WE WANT TO BE FOUND AS WELL.

SO WHAT DO WE DO? AS EASTER PEOPLE WHAT DO WE DO WITH OURSELVES? I THINK THE CHALLENGE IS TO FOLLOW THOMAS'S LEAD. TO WANT THE EXPERIENCE OF THE RISEN CHRIST SO MUCH, SO PERSONALLY FOR OURSELVES, THAT WE DON'T GIVE UP UNTIL WE FIND IT. THAT WE PURSUE THE GIFTS OF FAITH IN PRAYER, IN COMMUNITY, IN WORSHIP, IN STUDY, IN SCRIPTURE, SO THAT WE DISCOVER AND EXPERIENCE THE RISEN CHRIST.

PRAYER IS KEY...PRAYING CHRIST WILL SHOW HIMSELF TO US. THERE ARE SO MANY THINGS, GOOD AND BAD, WITHIN AND AROUND US, THAT TURN US AWAY FROM TIMES OF PRAYER. PRAYER CENTERS US AND REVEALS TO US WHO WE ARE AND WHOSE WE ARE AND HOW WE ARE TO ANSWER GOD'S CALLING AND LIVE AS CHILDREN OF GOD. HENRI NOUWEN, GIFTED THEOLOGIAN AND SPIRITUAL MENTOR TALKS ABOUT PRAYER AS THE CENTER OF HIS LIFE. HE

SAYS, "IT IS NOT A PERIOD OF SERIOUS ATTENTIVENESS TO THE DIVINE MYSTERIES. ON THE CONTRARY, IT IS FULL OF DISTRACTIONS, INNER RESTLESSNESS, SLEEPINESS, CONFUSION, AND BOREDOM. IT SELDOM PLEASES MY SENSES." BUT, HE SAYS, "I KNOW THAT WHEN I PRAY, I CAN FEEL ALL THAT I FEEL AND SENSE AND EXPERIENCE, WITHOUT TRYING TO HIDE ANYTHING, AND TRULY THAT MUST PLEASE GOD. SOMEHOW, SOMEWHERE, I KNOW THAT GOD LOVES ME, EVEN THOUGH I DO NOT FEEL THAT LOVE AS I CAN FEEL A HUMAN EMBRACE, EVEN THOUGH I DO NOT HEAR A VOICE AS I HEAR HUMAN WORDS OF CONSOLATION, EVEN THOUGH I DO NOT SEE A SMILE, AS I CAN SEE IN A HUMAN FACE. STILL GOD SPEAKS TO ME, LOOKS AT ME, AND EMBRACES ME, AND I KNOW THAT I AM LOVED." ISN'T THAT WHAT THOMAS WANTED? ISN'T THAT WHAT YOU AND I WANT—TO COMMUNE WITH GOD AND KNOW THAT WE BELONG TO GOD AND TO BE TOUCHED BY GOD'S LOVE?

JOHN TELLS US THAT JESUS FINDS US...NO MATTER HOW HIGH WE'VE BUILT THE WALLS AROUND US....NO MATTER THE DEPTH OF OUR DESPAIR OR THE SERIOUSNESS OF OUR QUESTIONS, JESUS COMES TO US WITH A SURPRISING PROCLAMATION OF PEACE AND A TOUCHING LOVE THAT IS STRONGER THAN EVEN THE VIOLENT DEATH HE ENDURED FOR US. DESPITE HIS WOUNDS, HE FINDS US.

AND JUST AS THE RISEN CHRIST CAME TO THOMAS, THE RISEN CHRIST COMES TO US. THAT'S THE SEASON WE ARE IN. THE SEASON OF EASTERTIDE. THE FIFTY DAYS BETWEEN EASTER AND PENTECOST WHEN THE CHURCH FOCUSES ON RECOGNIZING THE RISEN CHRIST IN OUR MIDST AND RESPONDING TO HIM IN OUR LIVES. EASTER. RESURRECTION. A NEW BEGINNING. WE ARE EASTER PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN MARKED BY CHRIST IN OUR BAPTISM. EASTER PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN MARKED BY OUR RESURRECTION FAITH AND FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT. THAT'S US! SPIRIT-FILLED PEOPLE EAGER TO SHARE THE BREATH OF GOD WITH THE WORLD. THIS IS EASTERTIDE, SO BE IT AND MAY IT BE SO FOR US. AMEN.

