

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

"Thomas Explains It All"

John 20.19-31

April 19, 2020

In a locked room, at evening of the first day of the week, the disciples huddled, afraid to go outside, not knowing what awaited them there, and not knowing what would become of their lives. Through the locked doors, Jesus, resurrected from the grave, came into the room and breathed peace into them. They rejoiced. Sure, they did! We live in a world where we need Jesus to come through millions of locked doors to breathe God's peace.

But that night one of them, only one of them, Thomas, wasn't in the room where it happened. When the trouble started, the others stayed put. He went out. Why? When he left the lockdown was he being faithful or foolish? Was he courageous or just impatient? Was he doing getting groceries or taking a walk, clearing his head, sorting out the mysteries of all that had happened, contemplating what his life had become since he started following Jesus?

When Thomas returned to the other disciples in the locked room after doing whatever he was doing, they told him all about how Jesus had appeared to them in this locked room, a feat until then unknown among living or resurrected beings. The news was incredible but Thomas was incredulous. Thomas said, "This is all very exciting, this virtual faith you're offering to me, but I can't stake my life on a virtual Jesus. The way of Jesus is too important to be gnostic. Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, I will not believe."

They were silent. He was right of course. They believed in Incarnation; they believed in the word made flesh. The resurrected Jesus had appeared to them. But what now? There was no guarantee Jesus would come back again to them. So, if this is all there is, maybe we should make the best of it, some wondered. We can make a virtual church on the idea of the incarnation.

Thomas jumped in again: "Can our faith be a virtual faith? Or just spiritual? Just our feelings or our ideas? No, hear me out brothers, Faith in Jesus is in Jesus who was crucified on the cross. His death was real and terrible. I've been thinking about this since we've been locked down. We should not go to the world proclaiming the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, but we should know nothing but Christ and him crucified. We will go in weakness and in fear and much trembling and our speech and message will not be in plausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that the faith of all those people everywhere might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

"So, if faith and the life of faith is going to be anything at all, it must be incarnate too. If we're going to be apostles, the resurrection for us disciples must be about the body of Christ, the wounds in his hands and his side, because for all of those in the years to come—those pastors

and mommies and daddies and children and widows and the poor and the hungry and the imprisoned and the sick and troubled and quarantined— they must know that the life of the church is tangible, physical, and they must not be satisfied with anything less. In this locked room, with everything to fear out there, even here, our faith can't just be virtual."

Peter, nodding, eagerly jumped in as Peter often did, "You're right," Peter said, "We have a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. In this, you rejoice, even if for a little while you have to suffer various trials. The genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold, tested by fire, results in praise and glory and honor when Jesus is revealed." All the disciples rose to their feet.

Thomas wasn't finished yet. He resumed speaking. "The life of faith in Jesus for all those generations to come cannot be just in their individual feelings or their ideas though feelings can be wonderful and ideas are very important, it must be sacramental. People need touch and taste and sight and sound. That's why God made us as bodies. Those people out there won't have the physical body of Christ like you did when he appeared to you, and as I hope he appears to me also, but the Christian faith we share from this locked room into all the world will be, must be tangible, incarnate in human sacrificial love, and sacrament, in bread and wine and water. We must show them, teach them that this is the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and because it is, is the life of the church Jesus calls into being and promises to be with.

"God did not create individual humans to act out their lives on a green screen staged backdrop of something that looks like a real world. God didn't code a matrix of simulation for individual humans to come to Jesus and then fly away. God created an actual world that he said is very good: a world with mommies and daddies and children and neighbors and grain to make bread and grapes to make wine and water to wash clean. And dogs to hug when we're sad, and fish and birds to delight, and dinosaurs and dandelions. God created a world with seasons and some of them are hard. A world with days, and some of them are long. A world with nights, and some of them are lonely. God created a world of life and of death."

Thomas paused. They knew all about death. They remembered Jesus and the last meal they shared with him and the cross. And they remembered Judas and the dark cloud that seemed to hover over him even until the end. "Some deaths," Thomas said softly, "are so very hard to understand."

And they wondered about what might await each of them on the other side of those locked doors.

"We may not leave our lock-down for a while," Thomas said to the other disciples, "but we will. And when we do, we will teach the whole world everything Jesus taught us, we will make other disciples who will join us. They will. Some of us will write letters. John, you, Peter, sharpen your pencils, you're going to be busy. Some of our enemies will join us, too. God will break their

hearts. We will send letters all over the world. I don't think I'll write one, but someone may write one using my name, and that's ok, I guess, but you'll know the difference.

“But our letters won't be all that we'll do. Letters on a scroll or a screen will be good but will never fully be enough. We will go to them too, from the east to the west, we will go because that's what God's love is like. Remember, that's what we learned in Jesus. We will baptize in the name of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We will break bread and say, ‘This is Christ's body,’ and we will pour wine and say, ‘This is the new covenant in Christ's blood.’ And they will do it to others as we do it for them. And on and on.

“Life will not always be easy in the future. When they are in situations when they can't have these things, like communion and baptism and hugs and handshakes and there will be lots of times through history—they will hunger for them even as I hunger for Christ now. Maybe they will remember me not as a doubter but as one like them who will not, cannot make do with anything less than Jesus. When they hunger for what they have lost, I hope they will remember me, and know that that hunger is holy because they hunger for what is good and true and just can't be replaced by a video screen. “

“What's a video?”

“They'll know someday. “

“So,” said Thomas, “my brothers so full of good news today about marvelous things you have seen, I celebrate with you what you have been given already, but in solidarity with all who in hard times and locked down places will suffer with patience and with impatience, I will wait. I will wait until I touch his side, and hear his voice. I will wait, with all who must wait behind whatever locked doors, for Jesus. Because he will come. I'm telling you I can feel it. He's coming. And if a stone couldn't hold him in, no locked door will hold him out. He's coming.

“Look, he is here. Oh, my Lord and my God!”

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2020