

Easter 2

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Easter isn't over. We haven't finished the story yet! Jesus is alive but not everyone is convinced....same as today..... The early reports that witnesses had seen Jesus were not well understood. The empty tomb confused almost everyone who went to take a look. Where's the body? Who took it? The people asked the same questions we would ask. But it was the post resurrection appearances of Jesus that turned skeptics into believers. The Easter resurrection continued for days to hundreds of people, because it's not the story that convinces people that Jesus is alive, it's the encounter with a living Savior that changes hearts. And it's no different today, many people don't believe in Jesus, for many have only heard a story. But when people have an encounter with Jesus, that's when things change. And that's exactly what happens in our gospel lesson for today, it's an encounter with a living Jesus that turns Thomas' heart from doubt to faith.

Now Thomas has developed a reputation as a doubter, but I think he's a lot like you and me, and I wouldn't call any of us doubters. But Thomas was a realist, he tended to look at and respond to things as they really are. He wasn't likely to be influenced by what people might say about things, Thomas had his own view, based on his own experience, and we understand this about him as we read scripture.

In the 14th chapter of John, when Jesus says to his followers, "I go to prepare a place for you...You know the way where I am going," Thomas is the one who replies truthfully, "Lord, we don't know where you are going; How can we know the way?" And in the 11th chapter, when Jesus speaks of going back to Judea,

Thomas knows that for Jesus to return to Jerusalem is to go to his death. Thomas was no fool. He counted the costs before making a decision. Nevertheless, it is he, who bravely urges the others to follow Jesus saying, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

So Thomas' reaction to the news of the risen Christ should not be surprising. He had been hardened and tempered by his experience in the world. He was, above all else a realist. And for Thomas, reality had come like never before, just days earlier, when his Master and friend had been crucified; when he had fled and deserted Jesus; when he realized that his hopes and expectations of the last three years, were as dead as Jesus was.

Thomas had lost his Lord; he had witnessed the crucifixion of his savior! But he had survived the ordeal. So while the other disciples were hiding in the upper room at Christ's first appearance, I wonder if Thomas wasn't out preparing to move on, to get on with the work of rebuilding his shattered life. It's no wonder, that when his friends share their joyous news, "We have seen the Lord!" he reacts with skepticism.

It is as if an AID's patient, finally reconciled to his fate, is told of a new miracle cure; or a disillusioned spouse, who has finally accepted that her marriage is over, is told that her

husband has suddenly become a “New man”. Nothing, you see, is worse than getting cut again by one’s broken dreams, and Thomas has bled enough. So he demands proof: “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

You know, Thomas never does actually place his hands in the Lord’s wounds, when Jesus invites him to. Even though he was filled with fear and anger and shame, because he not only doubted but also deserted Jesus, when Thomas is confronted by the risen Lord, when he is greeted by the forgiveness and grace embodied in the words, “Peace be with you,” he instantly believes and makes the great confession of John’s gospel: “My Lord and my God!”

In a heartbeat Thomas knows that he is in the presence of God, that he has been saved and redeemed by that God, and that he will never be the same again. This story, then, is not about doubt at all, rather it is about an encounter with the grace of God which has come down from heaven, embodied in Jesus Christ.

Now it’s important to note that Thomas’ doubt is swept away – but not his way of dealing with the world. His realism, his pragmatism, his desire for proof hasn’t changed. It is NOT Thomas’ realism that has been changed, you see, but reality itself. When he is confronted by God’s grace in the Risen Christ, Thomas is confronted by a whole new reality.

I can’t think of a much better example of this whole new reality than what we find in Victor Hugo’s magnificent novel “Les Miserables”. In this novel Hugo describes the fall, the actual moral disintegration of the lead character, Jean Valjean, a common laborer who is sentenced to 5 years in jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. The ravages of his time in prison, which ends up being stretched to 19 years, have, as Hugo describes, withered his soul.

Once released, Valjean’s descent continues, as no one will give him work or even sell him food or shelter because of his criminal record. He has nowhere to go. Hopeless and exhausted, he stumbles into a house of an old bishop, who treats him radically different than anybody else. He greets him politely and then treats him as an honored guest; feeding him, caring for him.

Valjean, though, is confused by his host’s generosity and is unwilling to believe his compassion. He is unable to accept the genuineness of such treatment, so he steals the silver plates from the bishop’s cupboard and flees into the night. The next day the police arrive at the bishop’s house with the captured criminal and the stolen silver. Valjean is utterly dejected, for surely he will be returning to prison.

Confronted by the man who took advantage of his generosity, you would think that the bishop would convict Valjean of his sins, but the bishop astonishes both the thief and his arresters. He says, “I am glad to see you.” “But I gave you the candlesticks too, which are silver like the rest and would bring 200 francs. Why didn’t you take them along with the rest?”

At the bishop's insistence, the police depart and the bishop hands Valjean the candlesticks, holding him just a moment longer before sending him freely on his way with a blessing, he says, "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts...and I give it to God."

In the very next scene, Valjean weeps as he views the depths to which he has sunk and begins to comprehend a whole new world of forgiveness and grace that he has been ushered into. In that moment, Jean Valjean dies...and is reborn, and much of the rest of his long, turbulent journey, is the story of a new reality in which Valjean both lives and gives as a result of his encounter with transforming grace.

"Peace be with you" Christ says to the skeptical Thomas. "My Friend, I'm glad to see you.", the bishop says to the hardened, unrepentant Valjean. Grace and mercy come in so many forms, and we experience them too – in the unexpected apology of a colleague, the undeserved forgiveness of a sibling, the all too often unnoticed tenderness and fidelity of a spouse – but when it comes, it leaves both the receiver and the giver transformed, for they have been joined, even at times unknowingly, to the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

But though such mercy always transforms, it does not replace the reality of this world. Valjean is still in oppressive Paris, facing persecution and death. Thomas is still in Palestine, facing the same opposition which led to the death of Jesus. And we too, are still in our often confusing, confounding, and always ambiguous worlds.

But there is something different, something new. For what both Thomas and Valjean gain – what we gain! – is not an escape from the world, not a break from reality, but a sense, a conviction, that God's grace, God's new kingdom, has already intruded into and transformed the kingdom of the world, so that nothing, not work, not school, not our relationships, not even life and death will ever be the same again.

That is what Easter is about – that we are forever transformed people.

No longer are we like those disciples locked behind closed doors, for we have been transformed and released into a world, being transformed by God. No more hiding behind our faith. No more hiding in our churches. No more hiding in gated neighborhoods. For Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

So open the door to God's grace and mercy, and bring resurrection peace to a world that so desperately needs it. Christ has risen from the dead. Alleluia!