

Easter 2  
April 19  
Mary Barnett

After the resurrection, the disciples see Jesus in the upper room and he breathes on them and gives them the Holy spirit and oh.... they rejoice, but Thomas is not there. When they tell him about it ...he finds it a bit hard to believe.

I love this story for so many reasons. It reminds me again and again that doubt is the foundation my faith rests on. It's not something to be ashamed of or cast away. It is a hunger and a need that deserves to be nurtured and fed. We don't need to have faith in what we already know for sure.

So, this week this story made me think not of doubt so much or of a desire for certainty, but of hunger for the real presence of God. For Thomas virtual knowledge was not enough. For Thomas, the idea, the story of God was not enough. Thomas hungered for an experience of the real presence of God, and he wouldn't settle for less. And so, as everyone is mulling around debating the issues:

How did Jesus get into the upper room?

or

Can the Eucharist be performed on Zoom?

Thomas plunged his hand into Jesus' side and said show me.

This week is the first time I, this no longer wet behind the ears but still green newly ordained priest will preside over the Eucharist. This is the ritual, the sacrament that brought me, someone on the outskirts of the church...although a spiritual person, right in the front door and onto my knees, which changed everything.

It gave me a way to put my hands over my oh so important head and admit I was hungry for something I couldn't understand or control...and ask to be fed.

And then the miracle was, I *was* fed. But wait.... how did that happen? What did I have to *believe* for that to happen?

And this is where Thomas comes in again.

Because it actually wasn't my belief at all, but in a sense its opposite: It was an openness, a need, a hunger, a loosening of my customary bearings, a willing suspension of disbelief that created the space that God filled. If I was already filled up with what I knew for sure I wouldn't have been fed in the same way.

So, Need, Desire, Vulnerability, Hunger, Doubt, *these* are the gifts we bring and God brings the food. He brings his presence in the breaking of the bread.

And I will be forever grateful to the church for maintaining this ritual for 2,000 years so that I, a wandering Unitarian modern dancer...could experience it and be changed.

Now we find ourselves in a strange situation where we are locked away in our own upper rooms. Not so much because of fear of persecution like the disciples were (Although of course we are a little afraid of being tracked down and persecuted by this invisible virus). But more importantly I think we are locked away from each other because of love ... which is what makes this experience so surreal. Because usually when we love people we run *towards* them but now, we are schooling ourselves to stay away and it's hard and counter-intuitive.

In the beginning I, like everyone else, convinced myself "Oh I'm fine. I'm not going to get this. You don't have to worry about ME", and I'd run out for my licorice or my wine or whatever but then it dawned on me I needed to

stay inside to protect other people. I mean...In NYC they didn't have enough hospital beds.

And we did it. We actually turned this ocean liner around. We stopped the ship of state because in spite of all our political disagreement and all our divisiveness, it turns out we really love each other and believe everybody matters. No one is expendable.

Eventually when we sift through the wreckage of this pandemic, however, and review the statistics we are going to have to come to terms with how we haven't been living according to this promise. And I believe when we see this all laid out, which we will, we will choose to reckon with this and make this country fairer.

Because in spite of our differences we don't believe that it is OK to just let a bunch of old people, our African American people, or people with asthma die. No one is expendable, Not Even ourselves. Not Even when we have hurt ourselves or someone else. Not Even when we are broken and addicted or angry or violent or guilty.

We are beloved. All of us. And that is the truth that came to earth and walked around in the very real presence of Jesus Christ. And that is the presence that we hunger for in the Eucharist, that we will take a risk and reach out and cross a sacred boundary and share spiritually today.

And that is the real presence that Thomas hungered for that caused him to reach out and take a risk and cross a sacred boundary and plunge his hand into the side of his Lord and Savior.

Now as Episcopalians we don't have to believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the wine and bread, and I cherish this fact. Pam might believe one thing and Veronika something else, and John and Steve and Mary Anne and Jessica... You can believe it is a miraculous story or a memorial meal or a sacred community gathering, and I think this openness of interpretation is essential; it makes a space for God to come alive in.

But I do, I do, believe in the real presence. I can't explain it but I do. It's a mystery with a history that the church has nurtured for 2,000 years. And at the same time, I believe the whole World is charged with the glory of God. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

*It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;*

And this ritual helps me see it and taste it and become more one with it...Because I have doubt...and because I have faith, and because I am oh so hungry for the real presence of God.

And that's why I think it is worthwhile for us to take a risk and reach out across our rooms and through our screens, like Thomas reached out and put his hand through Jesus' side. To experience the real presence, not the idea of God but the experience of God.

And Jesus? Jesus responded. Jesus responded by walking right through a wall to get to Thomas. If he can do that, I think he can certainly deal with ZOOM.

So, let us have faith that God can cross any distance and deal with any platform. All we need to bring is our hunger, and he will be with us as he was for Thomas in the breaking of the bread

**Amen.**