

Easter 2
April 24, 2022
Eric Rennie

WITHOUT A DOUBT

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:19-31)

Hardly is the ink dry on last week's grand celebration of Christ's Resurrection than we have this morning's gospel reading, which seems to present an opposing view. John says it was written "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Yet this particular story is about a guy who refused to believe. He wasn't going to buy this outlandish tale that Jesus had risen from the dead. Not until — and I quote — "I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side."

Jesus later chided Thomas for refusing to believe until he had seen with his own eyes. Mind you, the other apostles had already seen with their own eyes. The only difference is that Thomas had been absent when Jesus showed up the first time.

I admit I'm partial to the Apostle Thomas. I think he's gotten a bum rap with all this "Doubting Thomas" business. As far as I'm concerned, his supposed lack of faith is actually just him being sensible. Otherwise, you are forever at the mercy of people who claim to have been abducted by aliens or who saw Elvis standing in line at Starbucks just the other day.

I grew up in a house that was supposedly haunted. There were all kinds of strange goings-on in that house. I myself heard noises I can't explain. But I'm not going to tell you my house was haunted by spirits of the dead — not without proof.

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The problem with Christianity is that the whole thing hinges on belief. We're supposed to believe that Jesus was crucified dead and buried — but didn't stay dead. The original apostles saw him with their own eyes, even Thomas, who also felt his wounds. But what about the rest of us? None of us, so far as I know, ever saw Jesus standing in line at Starbucks or anywhere else. "If Christ has not been raised," St. Paul insisted, "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." Yet even Paul met up with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. For him, seeing was also believing.

Christianity would undeniably be more convenient if the New Testament gospels ended with Jesus nailed to a cross and with no mention of him having risen from the dead. But then, the whole point of Christianity is that he rose from the dead. There seems to be no getting around that, even though, Lord knows, people have tried.

Thomas Jefferson even took scissors and paste to the New Testament and produced his own gospel, with all the supernatural bits removed. His theory was that Jesus was a great teacher — period. There was no need to muck things up with a lot of hocus-pocus. And yet the Gospel of St. Matthew, from which most of Jefferson's scissors-and-paste version was taken, indisputably has the great teacher walking around after he was supposed to be dead. In the various gospel accounts, the formerly dead Jesus speaks and eats with his disciples. He shows some of them a good fishing spot. And, of course, he allows the apostle Thomas to touch the wounds from his crucifixion. St. Paul reported that Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at one time after he was laid to rest.

So where does all this leave those of us who are normally skeptical about miraculous claims of any kind? Some have followed Jefferson's lead and prefer to do without the supernatural bits altogether, perhaps becoming Unitarians. As for the rest, a third of mainline Christian clergy in the U.S. and two-thirds of clergy in the Church of England do not believe that Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. Even hardcore believers tend to pick and choose which Bible stories to believe. Otherwise, they must defend the literal truth of stories in which Moses parted the Red Sea and God created the world in six days — only a step removed from Elvis sightings and alien abductions.

Make no mistake: the resurrection is not just another miraculous claim that believers may pick and choose as they see fit. It is arguably Christianity's keystone, a tenet of faith that holds everything else in place and that cannot be removed without bringing down the entire edifice. The resurrection is deemed to be proof that Jesus is indeed the son of God whose sacrifice freed humankind from bondage to sin. And if Jesus triumphed over death, so can we. We're not just talking about some spectacular stunt, in other words. The entire plan of salvation depends on it.

I can't say whether Jesus actually rose from the dead. I didn't see it with my own eyes — nor, for that matter, did the writers of the four gospels. They all came along at least a generation after the fact — if indeed it was a fact. Paul, at least, was personally acquainted with some of those who claimed to have witnessed the event. However, the important thing for him was not whether you saw it happen but whether you *believed* it did. You might even say belief trumps fact in the scheme of things. This may explain why fundamentalists seem so impervious to scientific evidence. Among hardcore believers, there is something almost heroic about embracing truths that defy our plain sense of what is possible.

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I admit I'm pretty skeptical about anything that defies our plain sense of what is possible. But I hope I can never be accused of dismissing something out of hand merely because it's been declared a miracle. I'm reminded of John Donne's statement on the subject. He said there's nothing "God hath established in a constant course of nature, and which therefore is done every day, but would seem a Miracle, and exercise our admiration, if it were done but once."

You might think of the Resurrection was one of those things that was done but once, except that it's not. Emergency-room doctors and EMTs now routinely bring people back to life after they stopped showing any vital signs. This is something that would surely have been regarded as a miracle in Jesus' day. There are even rare instances in which people have returned to life spontaneously after all efforts at resuscitation have failed. This phenomenon is referred to in medical literature as the Lazarus syndrome after the New Testament figure whom Jesus is supposed to have raised from the dead.

If it could be determined with certainty that Jesus' resurrection was nothing more than a pious embellishment of the facts, I would not be surprised. Yet neither would I feel that my faith had been in vain, St. Paul notwithstanding. I know God is real. I know it as if it were a fact. I don't need to take it on faith that Jesus rose from the dead, even if it never happened. Real for me is the same as it was for Thomas. Real is what I have witnessed with my own eyes. Real is the equivalent of seeing the marks of the nails and feeling the wounds. I have witnessed enough in life never to rule anything out just because it defies conventional notions of reality. What if it could be determined with certainty that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead? Incredible, perhaps. But I would not be surprised.

Amen.