

**“A Personal Peace”**

*Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand  
And put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (John 20:27).*

“We have seen the Lord.” These words must have haunted Thomas. He and the other disciples had been through a harrowing ordeal. They had accompanied Jesus as He entered Jerusalem to the adoring shouts of the crowd. A few days later, as they met with Jesus in the upper room, He told the disciples that they would all betray Him, and then just hours later, they abandoned Jesus in His greatest moment of need and watched from afar as He was executed on a cross. On Easter evening, they were hiding behind locked doors, ashamed of their abandonment and afraid for their lives, but then Jesus came to them with a word of peace...yet Thomas wasn't there.

His fellow disciples greeted him with the announcement that they had seen the Lord, but imagine how Thomas must have felt. The eyewitness accounts of Jesus' appearance would have only increased his confusion. Had Thomas alone been excluded from the absolution so freely offered to the others? Had Thomas been left out of the Spirit-driven charge Jesus gave the disciples to forgive sins? “We have seen the Lord...” they said, and yet Thomas was left on the outside looking in, unable to understand and unwilling to believe.

As we think about this text, there are many questions worth asking, but today, the question I want to consider is why did Jesus come back and appear personally to Thomas. The Bible doesn't tell us and yet Jesus' appearance to Thomas is an incredible demonstration of grace, and it is also a story with powerful implications for us, because in this action, Jesus reveals a love for Thomas – and for us – that is very personal.

Thomas is a complicated character. For instance, in John 11, as Jesus led His disciples to the grave of their friend Lazarus where the enemies of Jesus were plotting against Him, Thomas made a bold statement of faith saying to the other disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16). And, in John 14, as Jesus told the disciples that He will prepare a place for them after He goes to His Father's house, Thomas again shows a “Peter-like” boldness as he interrupts Jesus saying “Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (John 14:16). In these accounts, we see a disciple who is at times assertive, yet uncertain; faithful, yet confused, and one who didn't hesitate to make his feelings known. And today, these snapshots from Scripture show us that we are all a little like Thomas.

Sometimes we are bold and confident in our faith. Sometimes we are courageous in our witness. In fact, just as Thomas said, “Let us die with him...” many of us made that same statement in our confirmation vows as we said that we “intend to...suffer all, even death, rather than fall away” from our faith. And many of us made a similar statement in our wedding vows as we said we would forsake all others, honoring our marriage commitment to God and our spouse “as long as we shall live.” But we haven't always done it.

More often than not, we are uncertain and unwilling, and, when life hands us things we don't expect, our faith is easily shaken and we doubt. In the face of financial hardship or personal crisis, our commitment to the Lord and to each other suddenly turns into uncertainty and, in an instant, we become like Thomas who said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it" (John 20:25). This is a place we have all been, and this is doubt we have all experienced. And, when we are faced with the difficulties brought on by our sin, and when we are challenged by life in a sinful world, doubt takes over and we question God's promises.

And how does God respond? He meets us where we are and He deals with us personally. To me, this is one of the most important points in today's reading. You see, Christ died for the sins of the whole world – this is true – but He delivers that forgiveness *personally*. And God's very personal touch is communicated to us in many ways. God comes to us *personally* as we read and hear His Word. He also comes to us *personally* in His Sacraments. In your Baptism, God called you by name and gave you the gift of faith and forgiveness personally. And in the Lord's Supper, God deals with you personally as you receive His body and blood, given and shed for you.

God also uses difficult times in our lives to deal with us personally. It's one thing to hear that God will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear (I Corinthians 10:13), it's another thing to hear those words in a hospital room or a funeral home. It's one thing to hear that God will work all things for good in the lives of his people (Romans 8:28), it's another thing to hear those words as we face the pain of broken relationships, and failed commitments. But, just like He did in the life of Thomas, God comes to us in places where He can deal with us personally, and, through these experiences, God illustrates His personal love for us in ways we could never ask for or imagine...and He does it for a reason!

You see, God gives us His peace personally so that we also can speak a personal word of peace to others. We remember Thomas as the disciple of doubt, but traditional church teaching tells us that Thomas went on from this encounter with the Risen Christ to take the Gospel to India where he was eventually martyred for the bold witness of his faith. All this happened because God dealt with Thomas where he was...and God deals with you in the very same way. Like Thomas, God has a purpose for your life on this earth. Your setting for ministry will look very different from the setting God gave to Thomas, but your purpose will be the same. God has dealt with you personally, and He has put you into places and relationships where He can personally deal with others through you!

The story of Thomas shows us that despite our doubts and our failings, our weakness and our sin, God comes to us personally. He does this for the same reason that John gives for writing his Gospel: "So that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). Through His Word, through His Sacraments, and through the people and experiences God has used to shape your life, He has met you where you are, and in His presence, you are forgiven and you are saved. Go with the personal peace God has given you today as you share this promise of God: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. Amen.

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