

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 2nd SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)
Acts 4: 32-35 Psalm 118 I John 5: 1-6 John 20: 19-31
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Poor Thomas is the underdog in today's resurrection story. We have given him the nickname "Doubting Thomas," because he doesn't believe the rejoicing disciples' news, "We have seen the Lord!" Since gospel times people who aren't quick to believe a report, or to accept the word of someone, have been called "Doubting Thomas." Someone says to us, "You're just a Doubting Thomas and that's supposed to put us in our place and silence our objections or unwillingness to jump right in and believe a story that pushes the bounds of credibility."

But really! After the events Thomas and the rest of Jesus' followers went through when he was captured and killed, who could blame Thomas for his reserved response to the excited reports of the others? They must have sounded hysterical to him. The story that Jesus was alive and appeared to the others goes more than a little beyond "the bounds of credibility." It pushes credibility to the extremes.

Aren't we happy then, that Thomas was there to be the doubter, the one wanting proof positive of Jesus' resurrection? If everyone believed and accepted the news right away we would have some very serious reservations. No one is saying that Jesus' resurrection is easy to believe, even with Thomas' questions. But still, I am glad there was a Thomas back then, because there certainly is a Thomas in me right now who raises his head periodically to ask questions that challenge my faith.

That interior Thomas probes: if I believe in the resurrection, how come my life doesn't reflect that faith better? Why am I still afraid and lacking trust? Why do I not invest more of myself in living my faith? Why are my efforts for God so half-hearted at times? Why am I afraid to take risks, but instead, cautiously play everything so close to the vest? See what I mean? The Thomas of the gospel story is very much alive in me. He needs reassurance, proof of the words the disciples are speaking.

What I also find comforting is that Thomas, the doubter, isn't cast out by the early community for his lack of faith. "Well, if you don't believe us, you can have no part with us! Get out!" A week after he expresses his doubts, Thomas is still

found in the community. Which should be a cautionary note for us modern believers. How tolerant and patient are we of those who pose objections to parish or Church policies and practices? For the sake of uniformity, we tend to want to evict, rather than engage in a dialogue of mutual respect.

Not only is the community tolerant of Thomas, so is Jesus. When Thomas does meet the Lord, Jesus doesn't reprimand him either. In fact, the first words Jesus says to the disciples, this time with Thomas there, is "Peace be with you." Then he offers to Thomas the proof he requires, "Put your finger here and see my hands and bring your hand and put it in my side."

Thomas wanted the experience of the Risen Lord for himself. He needed a personal confirmation that Christ was truly alive, as the disciples said. That's why I'm glad Thomas was the one to voice the doubts I would have had upon hearing the impossible news that Jesus had been raised from the dead. After Thomas' profession of faith, the gospel is addressed to those of us who won't get to have the sight, sound and touch Thomas did (if, in fact, he did get to touch Jesus' wounds). We're the ones Jesus calls, "Blessed," we are "those who have not seen and have believed." We must put out trust in the words we have heard from other believers.

Our faith is founded on those who witnessed to the resurrection through their words and deeds. Without their living testimony, we would have no concrete signs of Jesus' life among us. So, today, at this Eucharist, we can celebrate those who have taught us our faith and given extraordinary witness to how to live it out in our modern world. They were the lights that shone in the darkness. Because of them we are, as Jesus said, "Blessed" – for though we have not seen, we believe.

But still... there is an argument for the importance of meeting the Risen Christ ourselves. Our personal faith in the resurrection is helped, as John's was, when we personally experience the Risen One. Some people do have an intensely emotional experience of Christ. I am reading a recent biography of the American mystic and spiritual guide, Thomas Merton (cf. below, "On Good Book for the Preacher"). After some years of dissolute living he had an experience of Jesus' presence and God's love for him when he knelt and prayed in a church in Rome.

Most of us don't experience the Risen Christ in such a dramatic way. But aren't there times when we have risen to new life after a death experience? A woman told

me about the death of her husband who died a few years ago. They were married for 40 years, and she said, “When he died, I died.” Yet, in this past year she has begun anew, has been venturing out more, developing new friends, etc. Others have felt the Lord’s healing presence in a liturgical celebration as we prayed or looked around at the believers around us. Or perhaps we were at the bedside of a dying person who, despite sadness and pain, still had peace and trust. I was with a dying brother Dominican a few years ago and he smiled from his hospital bed and said, “I feel I am in the vestibule of heaven.” His courage in the face of death fed my own faith. I felt the presence of the Risen Lord in Brother Timothy. “The first day of the week” can happen at any time and place in our lives, because over and over we meet the Risen Christ, who says to us what he said to Thomas and the other assembled disciples, “Peace be with you.”

This resurrection story begins the way others often do, by telling us it is “the first day of the week.” The evangelists haven’t been specific about days and times in prior stories, so why are they doing it in the Easter accounts? Are they suddenly calendar conscious? No. When a story breaks a pattern, we need to pay attention. We are told with deliberation: it is the “first day of the week,” Something brand new is happening; the days are starting afresh; humans have a new beginning. It is like saying: our God who created the first day, is now creating a new first day. Thanks to the resurrection, things are brand new for us – we have new possibilities, with a future filled with hope. A new sun has risen, and a new light has pierced the darkness: it is “the first day of the week.”

On this “first day” God, in Jesus, has given us a chance to start all over. So we ask ourselves at this Eucharist: what of the past do we want to put behind us? Where would we like a new beginning? How have we stayed in the tomb and decided nothing can change? Whom have we concluded is a lost cause? If it is the “first day,” we may have been precipitous in closing the book on certain people and situations. After all, today teaches us that anything is possible: it is “the first day.”

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Jim Forest, ed. *LIVING WITH WISDOM: A LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991. Paper. ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-754-9.

This pictorial biography has been revised for the fortieth anniversary of Merton’s death. Besides the biographical material, the book includes many quotes by Merton on prayer, contemplation, peace and social justice. If you read “The Seven

Storey Mountain” this book will fill in some of the blanks in Merton’s autobiography and pick up where it left off. If you want to begin reading Merton, this is a good introduction to his thinking and the experiences that formed his thought.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.”

Reflection:

Our faith is founded on those who witnessed to the resurrection through their words and deeds. Without their living testimony, we would have no concrete signs of Jesus’ life among us. So, today we give thanks at this Eucharist for those who have taught us our faith and given witness how to live it in our modern world.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Who have been the strongest witnesses of faith in my life?
- Who relies on my faith when theirs feels weak?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“Peace be with you”

(John 20:19)

“People of faith and conscience from across North America have heard the call from Colombia—it is time to come together to pray and act for justice and peace in Colombia! On April 19 hundreds of local congregations in North America and Europe will join with hundreds of congregations and people of faith in Colombia to pray for the peacemakers and justice seekers in that war-torn land.”

“In the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the social teachings of the Church,

we understand the "social sins that cry to heaven because they generate violence, disrupt peace and harmony between communities within the same nation...Among these sins must be mentioned the drug trade, the recycling of illicit funds, corruption at every level, the terror of violence, the arms race, racial discrimination...and the irrational destruction of nature" (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/bkgrcolombia605.shtml>)

US Catholic Bishops' Position:

U.S. aid to Colombia must include basic standards for the protection of human rights.

Security measures must not undermine the democracy they seek to protect. They must strengthen rather than diminish human rights conditions in U.S. legislation.

Legislation must support multi-lateral efforts to bolster negotiated peace processes. We must increase development and humanitarian aid to Colombia. We must phase out aerial fumigation and increase alternative development. The Colombian Bishops have stated their clear opposition to fumigation. (<http://crs.org/public-policy/church-leaders.cfm>)

Did you know?

- The U.S. government has provided \$6.2 billion dollars to Colombia, the vast majority in military aid.

In the last decade some 60 Catholic representatives including bishops, priests, nuns and seminarians have been killed in Colombia.

Approximately 5,000 people are killed annually in Colombia's armed conflict while close to four million have fled from their homes.

What can I do?

- Pray for our brothers and sisters who are suffering in Colombia.
- Go to the following website to learn about the peace issues in Colombia and what actions you can take.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Isaac J. Stroud #0478925 (On death row since 2/9/95)
- James E. Thomas #0404386 (2/24/95)
- Tony M.Sidden #0368820 (3/15/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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