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Letting God Easter in Us (John 20. 19-31)

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Peace be with you.

I love this resurrection greeting for its hospitality – its capacity to meet us and embrace us wherever we are on this easter journey. And it is a journey. Easter is a season, not just a long weekend, and we need time to grow into it.

Yet this journey isn't just about God's hospitality to us; it is about our hospitality to God. The 19th century poet and priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, puts it this way, 'Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cressed east' ('The Wreck of the Deutschland'). For Hopkins, resurrection is not just about one man rising from the dead – an external event – but a process that needs to happen within us, just as it does in the world around us. Somehow I am reminded of what the 14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, said about the incarnation. It goes something like this: 'What good is it if Mary gives birth to Jesus 1300 years ago, if we don't give birth to him in our time?' We could say, 'What good does it do for one man to rise from the dead 2100 years ago, if we are not participating in his risen life now?' And what might that look like? Not just for us, but our families, communities and our world?

Tonight's reading recounts the second and third resurrection appearances recorded in John's gospel. Having already appeared to Mary Magdalene that morning in the garden, Jesus now appears to the disciples where they are gathered behind locked doors. It had certainly been a roller coaster ride for them – from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the ignominious and violent death of their friend and leader, and with his death, the death of the dreams and hopes he had inspired in them. There was also the shame of their own cowardice and capacity for betrayal. It is into this space of fear, shame, grief and confusion that Jesus speaks: 'Peace be with you.' Implicit in these words is the reassurance, 'Do not be afraid. It is I.' The

fact that he had come through a locked door might not have been reassuring at that point! And it isn't until he shows them his wounded hands and side that they recognise him.

With no words of reproach, and repeating the words, 'Peace be with you,' he then proceeds to commission them, entrusting them with his message of forgiveness and reconciliation, and empowering them with the gift of the Holy Spirit: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' The transformation of fearful disciples who hide behind locked doors, into apostles, fearless proclaimers of the gospel, is often cited as evidence of the resurrection. Our transformation usually takes longer!

My apologies for treating such momentous events so summarily, but it is where Jesus' encounter with Thomas has taken me that I want to unpack tonight. We have heard how Thomas, who had not been present on the first occasion, refused to accept the news of Jesus' resurrection second hand with those familiar words, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my hands into his side, I will not believe'. This is the Thomas who, earlier in John's gospel, when Jesus insisted on going to see Lazarus who had died, even though it would take them into dangerous territory, said to the other disciples, 'Let us also go that we may die with him' (Jn 11:16). This mixture of cynicism and fierce loyalty is seemingly part of his character. Am I imagining an element of dry wit as well? Now, one week after his appearance to the other disciples, Jesus turns up and challenges him, using Thomas' own words: 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' We don't know that Thomas even needed to touch him. His capitulation is immediate: 'My Lord and my God'. Surely more is happening here than having his need for tangible truth satisfied. Yes, there is a shift in perception – again mysteriously linked to placing his hands in Christ's wounds. But there is so much more here than cognitive assent.

Many of us have a soft spot for Thomas. Perhaps we see in him a reflection of our own doubt and need for verification. We may find that resurrection – or faith generally – is not something we can take on board second hand. Others' accounts or

testimonies may be helpful in pointing us in the right direction, but we need to see for ourselves. We would like to experience God for ourselves.

What lies behind Thomas' doubts? Our doubts? Perhaps our doubts stem from our longing for an authentic faith, coupled with our fear of being self-deceived. Perhaps that is a valid fear. Yet Jesus says to Thomas, 'Do not doubt, but believe' (Jn 20:27). David Bentley Hart's literal translation, 'Cease to be faithless but be faithful instead', avoids the opposition of doubt and faith. Presumably there is a degree of faithfulness in continuing to turn up, even in the midst of doubt, as Thomas does. Despite his protestations, Thomas wants to believe. We may need to ask ourselves if we really want to believe, or if our doubts are a form of resistance. Or perhaps we recognise both voices within us.

Our doubts can help to keep us honest on our search for an authentic faith. Obviously, we can't verify in the same way Thomas did. And Jesus speaks into this space when he says to Thomas, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen but who have come to believe'. What might it mean to come to believe without seeing? What might authentic faith look like?

Christian Wiman, contemporary spiritual writer and poet, warns of the dangers of compartmentalising belief:

You cannot devote your life to an abstraction. Indeed, life shatters all abstractions one way or another, including such words as "faith" and "belief". If God is not in the very fabric of existence for you, if you do not find Him [or Her] (or miss Him [or Her]) in the details of your daily life, then religion is just one more way to commit spiritual suicide. (Christian Wiman, *Ambition and Survival: Becoming a Poet.*)

For Paul Tillich, 20th century philosopher and theologian, doubt is an essential element of authentic faith. It seems doubt and faith need to come into dialogue, perhaps even dance together. Am I the only one who has sometimes prayed, 'Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief' (Mark 9:24)?

Anne Lamott, contemporary writer and activist, suggests :

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and the discomfort and letting it be there until some light returns. (www.goodreads.com)

Certainty, as we know, is the foundation of fundamentalism. And our world doesn't need any more of that. The challenge is how to translate the resurrection message of reconciliation into a public arena of increasing polarisation and echo chambers. But that is a conversation for another time.

Faith can seem rather precarious at times, because life can be precarious. And we might prefer a tad more certainty. Sometimes faith might seem to involve more seeking than finding – longer times in darkness waiting for the light to come. We may never reach the unequivocal clarity Thomas reached. Or we might experience it only in occasional snatches. Or that clarity might be an experience we have had earlier but have subsequently lost. It is hard to trust at these times that this might be a necessary part of our journey towards a deepening of faith.

Yet a felt absence can act as a real presence in our lives, calling us on. This seems to be the case with another Thomas: R.S. Thomas, 20th century Welsh poet and priest, especially in his poem 'Via Negativa'. He may have written this poem during a dark night of the soul, but the struggle to hold the tension between faith and doubt is present in others of his poems. Not for him the consolations of the *via positiva* – the consolations of finding the divine reflected in 'people and places', or accessed through imaginatively entering the gospel narrative we have been reflecting on tonight – Thomas' encounter with the risen Christ.

Via Negativa

Why no! I never thought other than

That God is that great absence

In our lives, the empty silence

Within, the place where we go

Seeking, not in hope to

Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars. His are the echoes
We follow, the footprints he has just
Left. We put our hands in
His side hoping to find
It warm. We look at people
And places as though he had looked
At them, too; but miss the reflection.

There is a ruthless honesty, a refusal to manufacture consolations in this poem, coupled with a loyalty that refuses to give up. God remains 'that great absence/ in our lives, the empty silence/Within', at the same time, paradoxically tantalising us with traces of recent presence that lure us to keep searching, even without the hope of finding or arriving. If the tone were not so heartrendingly desolate, and if the stakes were not so high, this might seem like a game of hide and seek. And perhaps we have sometimes felt like that in our relationship with God.

In another poem, Thomas seems to find some resolution. Now, rather than seeing silence as the absence of God, silence is a sign of, and a path to presence. He writes:

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This is the deep
calling to deep of the psalm-
writer, the bottomless ocean
we launch the armada of
our thoughts on, never arriving.
It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do

but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?

There is still no triumphalist certainty, no final arrival, no language suggesting warm intimacy. But there is faith. Faithfulness has been rewarded. He has found a way, a practice of silence and stillness, that helps him draw nearer to a God who is no longer an absence, but who is becoming for him an ubiquitous presence. And somehow it is enough. May we all find such a way.