

Revelation 1: 4-8
John 20: 24-31
April 7, 2013
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Easter

Aside from Jesus, the two great figures in the New Testament are John the Baptist and Thomas. John the Baptist is great because of his rigorous commitment to point beyond himself to the Christ who is to come. Once the messiah *has* arrived John is resolute. “He must increase and I must decrease.” That is, it is John’s role to release to Jesus all claims of self importance, all claims to a personal following in order to point others to Jesus. It is from John that we understand that a godly life is not one of purity of moral behavior. It is one which points beyond itself to God. Such a life requires a commitment to strict honesty. It requires a courageous willingness to confront and dismiss all illusions about one’s self, the world and most importantly all illusions about God. The message of John the Baptist is simply this: there is a God and I am *not* Him.

This same ruthless honesty is the great characteristic of Thomas. Lifts him up from among the other eleven disciples and makes him the most relevant follower of Jesus to our day and age.

As the scripture tells us, Thomas “was not with the other disciples” when Jesus makes his first appearance. When he hears the news that Jesus is risen he is utterly dubious—as indeed, the others had been when hearing the witness of the women disciples. Yet Thomas’ reaction is qualitatively different than the out of hand dismissal of the testimony of the women. Peter and the other men had called the witness of the women, “feverish ravings.” Their

dismissal was not only of the content of the report of resurrection, but of the women themselves.

Listen to Thomas' response: "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." This genuine and refreshingly honest response to the witness of the other disciples marks Thomas as a person of spiritual integrity. Far from deserving our criticism or condescending attitude, Thomas is someone who teaches us about how to be people of real faith. By honestly facing his doubt and demanding that faith confront the need of people for direct experience, Thomas becomes the one disciple who bridges the generation of eye witnesses to the rest of the generations who must believe without seeing directly.

You may reply, "But wait, Thomas does come to faith in the same way as the other disciples. He rejects the witness and only believes when Jesus appears to him in person." True enough. Yet consider the differences. Thomas is not with the other disciples when Jesus makes his first appearance. Why? Thomas, like Peter is passionate and impetuous. In chapter 11 of John's gospel Thomas anticipates fight at the site of Lazarus' death and is willing to die with Jesus. He is the one who demands to know the *way* Jesus is going so that he may follow him. In short Thomas feels a very deep connection with Jesus. He is devastated by Jesus' death and finds it difficult to be in the company of the disciples. His is a deeply personal wound and will not easily be healed by an easy proclamation of, "He is risen." He will not simply accept the word of others. He must experience Jesus alive for himself.

It is no mystery why Thomas' reaction to the news of the resurrection is preserved in such detail. It is no mystery why he is identified as the apostle of the ones "who were not

there.” Thomas honesty is honorable and sacred. Thomas’ demand for his own authentic experience of the risen Christ is a lifeline for all of us who were not there and who require evidence before we commit to believe. It is why the traditional naming Thomas as “doubting Thomas” is so unfair and worse, spiritually dangerous.

Why, because this label represents the empty faith of tradition. It represents a belief that it is enough to affirm that Jesus rose from the dead with no need to struggle with what such a belief means. Even worse it represents a smugness which diminishes the honest struggle of those who are not content simply to accept the tradition and who demand some evidence, some authentic experience; until that happens the proclamation of Easter will not touch a single human soul.

And this is the other point not to be missed. Thomas is still a believer. He is willing to accept the news that Jesus is risen. He simply needs an authentic encounter with Christ to be persuaded. Where will he find it? *How will he find Jesus alive in the year 2013?*

I know the answer. He will find Jesus alive here. He will find Jesus here not because of what we say, but because of *who we are*. He will find a community that is alive but has real wounds—wounds that he and his woman counterpart can experience.

We have personal wounds that we do not hide. We have wounds of the community, which are very real as we grieve the loss of Al Deitz together. We are the visible body of Jesus alive with his wounds because we share each other’s sorrow and live in hope...together.

And we are united by two simple—even stark—signs of Jesus: bread and grape juice: signs of his death that point us to life. Amen.