

Oh Really

A homily by Gary Heaton

Years ago, when I was in seminary, sermons had to have a title. That practice was also expected on the occasions I would preach in the Disciples of Christ church. When Debbie and I joined the Episcopal Church I would occasionally be asked to preach but I don't remember ever giving the sermon a title. Back then, being new to the Episcopal Church I probably thought homily was the title. Today though I really want us to think about how we decide what is real and what is not real. To help us do that I've titled the sermon *Oh Really*.

Now that I've set up the theme for the homily, it is important to realize that not all traditions nor all churches take Easter II and Thomas the Apostle as the theme for today.

This Sunday, as Tom Markley told me is known as Low Sunday. It's not because we are worn out and take a break after a deeply spiritual Lent, Holy week and Easter like we had this year at our parish. It is Low Sunday as contrasted with the High Feast of Easter Sunday.

It is also known as Quasimodo Sunday for the first two Latin words of the opening Antiphon at Mass and yes this is the origin of the name for the Hunchback in Victor Hugo's "*Hunchback of Notre Dame*".

Gail+ told us that today is called Holy Humor Sunday or Bright Sunday. This sounded like a rather modern way to celebrate the Sunday after Easter so I looked up some

sources. The idea is traced back to early Christian writers like Augustine? (430), Gregory of Nyssa (389) and John Chrysostom (407), who thought that raising Jesus from the dead was God's supreme joke played on death and the devil.

For centuries it was a day of lighthearted activity, singing and dancing, practical jokes and parties that celebrated the resurrection. I even thought about asking Ralph to come up and share a few of his jokes with us but decided against it. Sorry Ralph, maybe next year.

Years ago when working for the street department in my home town we would work nights for a week spraying the city for mosquitoes. Two of us worked together driving a big dump truck through the streets and alleys and around ponds and open fields with a fogging machine in the back of the truck spraying chemicals into the night. One night after driving 4-6 miles an hour for several hours, I was driving out of an alley into the street when a magnificent large white horse galloped down the street right in front of us.

I slammed on the brakes of the truck sending my coworker sliding out of his seat. "Did you see that horse" I asked. "It darted in front of us and ran into the school yard a block away". By that time I had turned the truck so the lights lit up the school yard but I could not see the horse anywhere in the school yard or the open pasture beside it. My coworker looked at me and asked "Gary, did you see the two trash cans as you knocked them down and drove over them with the truck?" Needless to say, we decided that it was really time for breakfast!

Like us, Thomas used his senses of sight, touch and hearing to understand what was happening. He learned by asking questions and making somewhat impulsive comments. It would seem that he also learned by action and by using his mind to understand what was happening.

This poem by Thomas Troeger written in 1984 gives us another glimpse of what Thomas saw as real:

Poem

These things did Thomas hold for real:
the warmth of blood, the chill of steel,
the grain of wood, the heft of stone,
the last frail twitch of blood and bone.
His brittle certainties denied
that one could live when one had died,
until his fingers read like Braille
the markings of the spear and nail.
May we, O God, by grace believe
and, in believing, still receive
the Christ who held His raw palms out
and beckoned Thomas from his doubt.

(Thomas Troeger, 1984, Psalter/Hymnal of the Christian Reformed Church)

Scripture gives us more information about Thomas than many of the other disciples. His name is listed with the other disciples in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts. John also includes Thomas in the list of disciples gathered at the Sea of Tiberias in another encounter with the Risen Lord. However, it is the Gospel of John that gives us real insight into who Thomas was and what he believed.

Jesus has received word that Lazarus was ill and then tells the disciples that Lazarus is dead but they are going to his

house anyway. This means he and the disciples are going back to places where people had tried to kill him. Thomas says "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Is Thomas swept up in the emotions of the moment? Is it false bravado that will fade when faced with real dangers? Or are these the words of a man who has walked with Jesus, listened to Jesus and has made a commitment to follow him regardless of the risks?

During the Passover meal after Jesus has washed the disciple's feet he talks to them saying: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life...". There is Thomas again, impulsive, confrontational, questioning. It has been an emotional night; he is worried because he doesn't want to lose his teacher and friend. He hears the words of assurance from Jesus but those words don't remove his fears and insecurities. He really wants to be able to go with Jesus but he doesn't know how. He's not afraid to ask and Jesus is not afraid to answer.

In many ways this prayer adapted from Thomas Merton captures what Thomas may have experienced. Let us pray:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really understand myself,
... the fact that I think I am following
your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
... I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
... I know that if I do this you will lead me by the
right road, though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though I may
seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and
you will never leave me to face my troubles alone.
Thomas Merton

We next learn that Thomas is not with the other disciples when Jesus appears to them after the Resurrection, greeting them with Peace and the Holy Spirit. Have you ever wondered where Thomas was? Had he gone off alone and discouraged to grieve? Was he so angry and upset that he couldn't do anything but walk the roads alone? Why had this happened? Why had they crucified Jesus? He was a teacher and healer and now he was dead. All the painful discouraging things Jesus had told them would happen did. Thomas saw no evidence that the other things Jesus had told them were

happening. Yes he knew the tomb was empty and he had heard about people seeing the risen Jesus but he just could not see through the pain and the grief, not yet anyhow. And now his closest friends were telling him they too had seen the risen Lord. As much as Thomas wanted to believe it, it just did not seem real. He had seen people crucified before and when they were dead they were dead.

He could not take it any longer. Tears burned his eyes, his heart pounded beyond belief. He cried out as loud as he could to his friends, to Jesus and to God "Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the marks of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe". There he had said it and now he waited.

We don't know what happened during that next week. Maybe Thomas was able to find comfort with friends and the disciples; maybe he began to grieve less and to let his anger and fear fade.

He was there this time and Jesus said "Peace be with you" and 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 me and yet have come to believe."

The Gospel story of Thomas ends when the disciples meet the risen Lord at the Sea of Tiberias but the story of Thomas continues. Tradition sends Thomas to India where in 52 AD he arrived along the Malabar Coast and founded the earliest

Christian Churches in India. Those churches in the state of Kerala continue to the present time. Apocryphal writings tell of the many ways his faith led him to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. These writings also tell us that he suffered a martyr's death in India.

In an article on the explore faith web site, The Reverend Herbert O'Driscoll and The Rev. Margaret W. Jones write this about the Apostle Thomas: Doubting Thomas? I don't think so. Thomas, as O'Driscoll says, does not take his allegiance lightly. But when he does give his loyalty he gives it totally. He is the one, after all, who asked his questions, got his answers, and then said with all his heart (and mind), "my Lord and my God!"

May God give us the strength to do the same!