

Doubting Thomas

John Dear | Apr. 6, 2010 On the Road to Peace

Doubting Thomas, we call him contemptuously. It's a cheap and easy temptation to reprove him, the common-sense disciple who refused to believe that Jesus had risen. He wants to believe, I think, but he can't. The implications are too grand; they bear too heavily on his mind. He's in crisis; psychologically he is tied.

"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25).

He asks for sensible proof. And one thinks it's his wan attempt at keeping the crisis at bay. He's trying to keep reality as he knew it from crashing around his ears. And that being the case, we have no grounds to reprove or gloat. Compassion for Thomas is the more proper attitude. For we are like him -- even at our best.

We too fear reality, as we've constructed it, from crashing down around us. We too can bear only so much disorientation. It explains our silence in the face of our nation's two wars. It explains our consent to the death penalty. To nuclear weapons, to corporate greed. We've made certain peace with the big business of death. To our feeble minds, death is reality. We find ourselves faltering when we reflect on resurrection's repercussions.

Thomas struggles early on. In the Gospel of John, he urges the band to return with Jesus into the teeth of danger at Judea. "Let us go and die with him," but as the story unfolds, Thomas isn't there. He wavered and played things safe. More, during the last supper discourse, he showed himself as obtuse -- he confessed to knowing neither where Jesus was going nor "the way."

Likely he wasn't obtuse at all, but quite the opposite. Rather he had caught a disquieting glimmer of what it all meant. If the nonviolent Jesus is to rise, then his band of followers is in deep waters indeed. They too are summoned to "the way."

The poor man balked. For resurrection life comes by way of a cross -- a sticking point to most of us. And Thomas, like most of us, draws back. Thus Jesus' offers Thomas the proof he seeks. "Touch my wounds ? and believe."

Touch and believe; the two go hand in hand. We meet the risen Jesus when we touch the wounds of the world -- the wounds of the poor, the wounds of the suffering. No one comes to believe meaningfully in the possibilities -- for peace, justice, for the fruits of resurrection -- until he touches the wounds of others. Without that, our believing reeks of sanctimony and religiosity.

Through our work among the homeless, in soup kitchens and shelters, through our work with the sick and dying in hospitals, our work among migrants and prisoners, our work in warzones and refugee camps, our work in our broken inner cities, whenever we meet the poor, disenfranchized, and marginalized, when we touch their wounds -- their pain, their suffering -- we meet the risen Christ. We discover God. And this encounter not only gives us new life and hope, it changes our lives.

This is a consistent Gospel pattern. From the three wise men who pay homage to the infant Christ and go home a different route, to the blind man of John 9 whom Jesus heals and the authorities excommunicate, once you encounter the risen Christ by touching his wounds in the world's poor, you set off on a different route. Thereafter you're prone to speak up, to advocate for justice, to accept being embroiled in legal trouble. Christ rises in you, and you begin a new resurrection life.

And it soon becomes political -- the doubting Thomas episode makes this clear. He sees, he touches. And now believing, he utters his first subversive words. "My Lord and my God" -- that is the title demanded by Domitian, emperor from 81 to 96 C.E., the generation in which John wrote. Roman texts of the era attach the title, word for word, to the emperor. And any other claimant to the title -- and his followers -- was suspected of treason and subject to arrest. (See *Becoming Children of God* by Wes Howard Brook for the details.)

Thomas then comes under a new light. His doubts had less to do with mere cognizance of facts than with their implications. Belief requires conversion and response. And Thomas responded. He embraced his future, which consisted now of resistance to the brutal empire. *Nonviolent* resistance. Resistance, if necessary, to the point of martyrdom.

Or did he embrace it? The narrative strikes in us our own trace of doubt. "Have you come to believe because you have seen me?" Jesus returns. The question hangs in the air; nowhere to be resolved. For it is clear that the evangelist writes for those who come *after*, to those who would take the journey of peacemaking through the ages. To them, John's Jesus offers a final beatitude. "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29).

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I spent Easter Sunday in Los Angeles, after a few days visiting friends and relatives, and participating in the Catholic Worker's annual Good Friday Stations of the Cross and Peace Walk. (And I endured my second Easter earthquake that afternoon while sitting at LAX airport. My first was in 1984, in Wernersville, Pa., where I was sitting in the Jesuit novitiate on Easter Sunday, discussing the meaning of resurrection with another novice, when the whole building began to shake violently.)

I joined a huge crowd for an early Easter morning Mass at a popular Santa Monica church. It was gorgeous -- the singing, the welcome, the readings, the sermon, the Eucharist. It was all riotous colors and fragrant flowers and liturgical opulence and sweet inspiration and tender comfort.

Still, I came away feeling vaguely disturbed. The parishioners left consoled by resurrection, but they were told nothing of its implications. The church abuse scandal was mentioned in passing -- a matter pertaining to the church's credibility and survival. But matters about which the church should be expending itself got no hearing.

No mention of wars, poverty, starvation, executions, gang murders, nuclear weapons, climate change. No mention either that resurrection pushes us to resist our culture, pegged to violence, and to transform it into one of lavish peace, blossoming nonviolence.

Our consolation doesn't derive from an endearing Easter service. Rather it derives from Jesus' resurrection itself. If we can take it in, if we can bear up under its implications, it stirs us to new hope. It goads us to act, to bear witness for justice, disarmament and peace. Our lives will grow prophetic; we will speak out against violence. Our vision will clear; light will be shed on Jesus' "way" of nonviolence.

May we truly believe. May we witness to the resurrection with all its glorious social, economic, and political implications, and so be worthy of the blessing.

To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to:
<http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. John will lead a retreat, "The Gospel According to John," April 30-May 2, near Stroudsburg, Pa., see www.kirkridge.org; and "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, N.M., see www.ghost ranch.org. He will lead weekend retreats on "Jesus and the Gospel of peace" in Massachusetts, May 21-23 (see: www.rowecenter.org) and Los Angeles, June 17-20 (see: www.hsrcenter.com). John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

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