

Doubting and Believing... Sermon on John 20, v 23-31

Dear sisters and brothers,

Easter is over and all the Easter bunnies, chocolate eggs and decorations have vanished from the shops, the front yards and living rooms until the industries start their promotion again next year. For us as Christians the miracles of Easter lie far beyond these worldly traditions and in the course of the church year the empty tomb is not the end of the story, not the end of Easter but rather the beginning of a time in which we celebrate Jesus' resurrection. So let us consider this Easter season by looking back on what happened and then reaching out to the future with the signs of resurrection that Jesus has shown us.

Two Sundays ago we were invited to join Jesus and his disciples on the Stations of the cross. By hearing the Bible readings we relived the moments of joy, anger, guilt, blame, despair and relief. I don't know about you, but for me it was a very intense experience because I could picture and feel all these different emotions in such a short time. My path took me from the cheering crowd that accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem to the lonesome Jesus who was deeply touched by the strange woman anointing him. I witnessed the last supper that was overshadowed by the news that one of his friends would betray him. And then again I felt the loneliness of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and the helplessness of his friends who just seemed to get it so wrong and to misunderstand the situation so terribly. I was forced to see Jesus on the cross and feel the despair of those who witnessed his crucifixion - the hopelessness, the grief and the loss of orientation that all his followers had to go through in these moments when the sky turned black. And only a few minutes later I was supposed to feel the relief and the joy of those discovering the empty tomb, realizing that Jesus had risen from the dead? I must say, I was overwhelmed and it was quite hard to overcome the sadness and serenity of the crucifixion scene and rejoice in the resurrection. Too many events. Too little time. Too many emotions. And too much horror. Too much mystery. And definitely too much happening to a person so close to my heart.

This experience made me understand only a little what Jesus' disciples, his friends and family must have gone through and what a roller-coaster ride they were on when they met again after his resurrection. One of them was Thomas. Exactly that Thomas that we met in our reading a few minutes ago - Thomas who needed to see Jesus' wounds to believe it was really him. Can we blame him? Are we surprised? Do we criticize his so-called lack of faith or do we admire him because he isn't able to leave the stations of the cross behind so fast?

Let us meet him, in person, and decide for ourselves what he means to us and what lessons his story may teach us about Easter. Let us hear his version of the story and judge his behavior on this basis. Let us listen to Thomas...

My dear sisters and brothers at PC, I am Thomas. I am sure you have heard of me. I have many different names. „Doubting Thomas” is probably the most familiar one. But they also call me Didymus, the twin, or the man that didn't believe. What do you call me?

Before I tell you about my first encounter with Jesus after his resurrection I would like for you to recall the saddest day in your life... a day when the world turned upside down and nothing, simply nothing was the same as it had been. I would like you to imagine that somebody you really loved had to suffer a great deal because somebody else you really trusted and respected betrayed him. And I would like you to ask yourselves whether you have ever felt so shattered that you didn't know who and what to believe.

This is exactly the state of mind I was in and I can't tell you how scared and confused I was in the days after Jesus had been crucified. The fact that my friend and my teacher had to die on the cross was hardly bearable but the circumstances of his death and the way the man I respected so much was ridiculed, abused and tortured just overwhelmed me. Can you imagine how frightened I was when I heard the crowds yell „Crucify him!” This was the same crowd that had thrown down their cloaks before Jesus and waved palm branches, cheering „Hosanna! Blessed be the king!” when he entered Jerusalem a few days earlier.

Would one of us disciples be the next to be nailed to the cross? Would we all start to betray each other now, just to save our own lives? I didn't know who to trust and what to believe in.

And then I had this deep feeling of sadness inside. I couldn't have believed that Jesus was dead if I hadn't seen it for myself. I needed to see his wounds, and his body hanging on the cross to get it right. But yet, although these scenes haunted me day and night, I couldn't bear it. I would walk along the lakeshore and see him at the places we had been together. I saw him sitting there on a stone... Not because he was really there but because I wanted him to be alive so much. Deep inside there was a wish to remember him just as he was and think of the times in which we laughed together, in which we prayed and shared bread and wine.

Are these feelings familiar to you? Can you recall days in your life in which you didn't know who you could turn to and when you wished that you could turn back the hands of time? Go back to the moment when you woke up in the night and just for a moment didn't realize whether the world you were facing was a dream or reality?

I was in the midst of this process of hoping, doubting and grieving when Simon Peter and the other disciples approached me and told me that they „had seen the Lord!“ Of course I didn't believe them. How could I? I thought they were imagining things and going mad, just like me, trying to come to terms with all that had happened. We were all locked up behind closed doors, how could they have even met Jesus? I never had a moment of doubt that Jesus could make a miracle happen, after all I had seen so many performed by him, but Jesus was dead. And for me it was clear that I would only believe the contrary if I saw the marks of the nails on his hands. And I have to tell you that it made me furious to see the others rejoicing and celebrating... How could they be so naive? Why didn't they use their common sense and at least try to accept the truth that Jesus had left us? Did they really think they could carry on from here and pretend nothing had happened? Did they forget Jesus' body marked by the blood and the stains of hatred and brutality? I wasn't able to put these images aside so quickly and join in the spirit of hope and joy. The only person who could have truly made me believe was Jesus himself. I longed to see him; not far away in the distance, not through the eyes of my friends, but right in front of me. I needed to touch him to understand. I needed something real after all that I had been through.

Another eight days passed. Eight days of hiding from the Jews. Hiding from the events that had occurred. Days of loneliness and despair. And then suddenly Jesus appeared among us. He greeted us with the familiar words „Peace be with you!“ and for a moment it was as if he had never left us. As if it all had just been a bad dream. But then Jesus approached me and said: „Put your finger here, and see my hands.“

I can't describe the feeling I had when I touched his scars. It felt so real. So familiar and yet changed. The Jesus who was now standing in front of me carried the marks of the nails... the marks of cruelty and pain and the marks of death. Although his presence was ever so strong after these many days without him, he also had something very vulnerable and human about him. And as I was standing there, Jesus looked at me and said: „Put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not be faithless, but believe!“

And I can truly tell you that from that moment on I did believe. And a huge load dropped from my shoulders as I recognized him and exclaimed: „My Lord and my God!“ I let go of all the anger towards my friends, the loneliness I had felt in being the only one to doubt the news and much of my despair and my instability which had been caused by all the betrayal and confusion. All of that vanished in this moment. Jesus had risen. And he made the effort to convince me... to come after me... to make me believe. He allowed me to see him just as he was.... Wounded. Changed. Human. And as we were standing there, there was this bridge between his suffering and ours. Between his loneliness and mine. Between his despair during the last minutes of his life and my hopelessness facing the fact that I had lost my sense of life. There was a bridge between his strength and the fact that he had overcome death and my faith. I needed to see him, hear him and feel him to take all of this in and make it mine.

I needed a very real, hands-on experience to form a bridge between the past and the future.

And what can I say? From that moment on I was able to face the future. I was able to feel the hope and convey it to others by telling about my experience. I was able to face the pain I had inside and transform it into joy, into trust and into strength to carry on.

As you can see from my encounter with Jesus, believing does not mean „not doubting“. It does not mean being in control of your feelings in times of despair and never losing hope. For me the wonder of believing lies in having the courage to ask the right questions, not being satisfied with just any old answer. Inquiring. Challenging. Facing your despair. Eventually accepting what has happened and opening your heart and mind towards new possibilities, new hope and the miracles that only God can make happen, through Jesus Christ, his Son. Believing means trying to sort out the events in your life, trying to understand and to cope and yet trusting that there are things you cannot understand and acknowledging that some wounds may never disappear, as long as you live. Believing means turning to Jesus in times of doubt. Challenging him. Talking to him. And trying to come close to him. Letting him touch you as you lay your fingers on his wounds. Grabbing the hand that he reaches out to you and seeing the signs that he sends.

My encounter with Jesus ended with his words: „Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are the ones who have not seen and yet believe.“

Some people have misunderstood those sentences. To me it was clear that Jesus wasn't judging me and trying to shame me. He felt my despair and reached out to me to help me believe. He offered his wounded body to me and let me touch the places that hurt most. He made available to me what I needed most in this moment. And he will reach out to you, too, if you turn to him.

I have seen Jesus. And I do believe that he has risen. I have seen him so that you may believe without having seen him. I have touched him so that you may believe without having touched him. I have spread his message of hope so that you may receive it and pass it on. I have overcome my fear and my doubts so that you, too, may transform your doubts into belief.

And whenever you are in doubt, feel alone and desperate and are waiting for a sign of God in your life, think of me and see the bridge that has been built between Jesus and me – the bridge that reaches out to you and the world. Jesus is here, whether you see him or not. Rejoice! Believe! And trust.

Yours sincerely,
Thomas