

## Sacred Doubt

John 20:19-29

I have very vivid memories of the Easter services that I attended as a child. I grew up in a large, rather stately church that I think saw Easter as an opportunity to release all sorts of pent up Methodist anxieties in one great spasm of sound and pageantry. Naturally late, I would be rushed into my Easter outfit – that dainty starched little dress, the white tights, the patent leather shoes that you shined with a dab of Vaseline oil, the hat held in place with an elastic band that cut into your chin, the dainty purse that held the little white gloves. Those gloves, at least the one that wasn't lost by the end of morning, seemed always to have a smear of chocolate on it – a reminder, perhaps, that even our very best efforts at gender conformity and perfection are often flawed.

Off we would pile into the family car, circling the block for a place to park, dashing into church where we were greeted with the sickeningly sweet smell of dozens of Easter lilies in full bloom mixed with the odors of over perfumed women and men generously splashed with Old Spice. People were crammed into the pews and the ushers were always frantically running around setting up extra chairs to accommodate the large overflow – the Easter crowd.

Amidst the murmurings of voices, the tension mounted until suddenly, with a blare of trumpets the service would begin. Stirred into action, the congregation would rise as the choirs and ministers poured down the aisles, processing in with a dignity and pomp that seemed regal in nature. He is risen! He is risen! The sound of our mighty song would swell and fill the sanctuary. And there would be that amazing moment that you knew was going to happen but would still catch you by intense surprise when the organist, Mrs. Brickel, would open up those special pipes in the back. The blast, the sheer volume of it would nearly catapult those in the balcony right over the railing and the sound would reverberate in your chest as the choir launched into a soaring descant that kind of confused everyone, but still we persevered. We sang it out: "Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia! Alleluia!" The Christian Church victorious! He reigns! O death, where is thy sting? Alleluia! Alleluia! To a child already hyped up on a decisively grand consumption of candy that constituted breakfast, it was magnificent... and it was terrifying.

So here we are, the week after Easter, still flush from the celebration of victory. And we open the text and are confronted, of all things, with the specter of doubt. Thomas, who was called the Twin, is reported to say, "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." Skepticism, and in the midst of the finest hour.

If you are looking for a novel to spend spring break with, I'd suggest Yann Martel's novel, *Life of Pi*. It is an unusual, dare I say enchantingly outrageous tale about a young son of a zookeeper and his struggle for survival after a shipwreck while enroute from India to Canada. As the ship sinks, Pi's finds himself in a lifeboat with a zebra, orangutan and 450 pound Bengal tiger. Pi himself is an interesting character. Religious by temperament, to the surprise and discomfort of his parents, Pi is a devoted Hindu, Christian and Muslim.

Of doubters, Pi has this to say:

I'll be honest about it. It is not atheists who get stuck in my craw, but agnostics. Doubt is useful for a while. We must all pass through the garden of Gethsemane. If Christ played with doubt, so must we. If Christ spent an anguished night in prayer, if He burst out from the Cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' then surely we are also permitted doubt. But we must move on. To choose doubt as a philosophy of life is akin to choosing immobility as a means of transportation.<sup>1</sup>

With all due respect to Pi, I sometimes wonder if the world might be a little better off if more of us were like Thomas – skeptical of exuberant claims of victory, power and God's special presence. If there is one lesson that we desperately need to learn from the past five years of our nation's sorrowful history, it may be that glib words of conquest and smug announcements of mission accomplished require a lot more sober scrutiny before we offer our unwavering allegiance. As a nation and as individuals we might do well to follow the lead of Thomas and demand more before marching blithely past doubt and acquiescing to brazen proclamations that play on our desires for power, influence and pride.

But while I appreciate this aspect of Thomas, and tend to think that his diminished reputation is somewhat undeserved, there is something more in this passage in John that calls to me and lures me towards it. To Thomas, Jesus says, *Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.* There is the suggestion that if we have doubts about the genuineness of the risen Christ, the invitation is to reach out and touch the wounds. If we are looking for grand displays of power, of shock and awe, this Jesus will disappoint. *Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.*

One of my very favorite contemporary theologians is a Joerg Rieger from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. A fierce critic of empire, unfettered capitalism, and the alarming trend where everyone and everything is viewed simply as a commodity in the global market place, Rieger is greatly disturbed by the growth of structures of exclusion – the great gaps of power, possessions, security, and hope. He finds the growing suffering and poverty within the world to be a very serious theological issue, and sees deep problems when the great texts and language of the church are carefully molded by elites to serve the interest of the dominate gods and justify injustice, silence voices, and distort the good news of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Rieger suggests that for the theological task today to be meaningful; to illuminate God and humanity, if you will, we must begin with that which hurts – those places of suffering, oppression and woundedness that seem far removed from the riches and promises of the prosperity gospel. According to Rieger, turning to the experience of "those who are put into the place of the 'other' by the powers that be" has the potential to open our eyes to the divine Other, and teach us something about ourselves as well.<sup>3</sup> This is not to romanticize suffering, but it is to remind us of the sacred connection that is possible when we dare to take up the invitation of Jesus. *Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.*

In her poem, *The Century's Decline*, The Polish poet and Nobel prize winner Wistawa Syzmborska captures the hopes and longings that not only touch those of us today who long for a kinder, more just world, but also extends back to that small community in Jerusalem who were still reeling from pain and struggling to understand what the death and suffering of their leader meant for their lives and future.

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.  
It will never prove it now,  
now that its years are numbered,  
its gait is shaky,  
its breath is short.

Too many things have happened  
that weren't supposed to happen,  
and what was supposed to come about  
has not.

Happiness and spring, among other things,  
were supposed to be getting closer.

Fear was expected to leave the mountains and the valleys.  
Truth was supposed to hit home  
before a lie.

A couple of problems weren't going  
to come up anymore:  
hunger, for example,  
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect  
for helpless people's helplessness,  
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world  
is now faced  
with a hopeless task.

Stupidity isn't funny.  
Wisdom isn't gay.  
Hope  
isn't that young girl anymore,  
et cetera, alas.

God was finally going to believe  
in a man both good and strong,  
but good and strong  
are still two different men.

“How should we live?” someone asked me in a letter.  
I had meant to ask him  
the same question.

Again, and as ever,  
as may be seen above,  
the most pressing questions  
are naive ones.<sup>4</sup>

“How should we live?” To Thomas, a man of doubt, and to each of us today who continue  
struggle to find hope, meaning, and life in a troubling and challenging world, Jesus calls, “Put  
your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but  
believe.”

May it be so with us.

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<sup>1</sup> Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* [NY: Harcourt Books, 2002] p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001], p. 170. In a similar vein, see also Joerg Rieger, editor, *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]

<sup>3</sup> Rieger, p. 103.

<sup>4</sup> Wistawa Szymborska, *Poems News and Collected 1957-1997* [San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1998] p. 198-199.