



Doubting Thomas (John 20:19–29)¹

KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

The disciple Thomas—“Doubting Thomas,” as he is known—is a man after my own heart. I like Doubting Thomas, you see, because he would have been right at home where I come from: Missouri, the Show-Me State.

Thomas is the Show-Me man. He is absent from that first Easter appearance of Jesus to the rest of the disciples, and now, a week later, he cannot believe what they’re telling him. Thomas is the pragmatic one, the Show-Me man. Show me your hands. Let me touch your side. Show me that you are really Jesus of Nazareth, and not some strange vision cooked up by the imagination of my fellow disciples. All I know is what I see, and the last time I saw my Lord, he was dead. Show me, or I won’t believe.

Have you ever thought about what a strange, even morbid demand it is that Thomas makes? He does not ask merely to see Jesus. He is not simply a seeing-is-believing kind of guy. He does not want to gaze at Jesus in awe or even embrace him. Thomas wants to touch the wounds of Jesus. He wants to put his fingers in

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Doubting Thomas is an odd, even discordant figure in the resurrection accounts. His demand to examine the physicality of the risen Christ seems overkill, as if he cannot believe his eyes. But perhaps Thomas is the only sane one in the bunch, one who understands what the resurrection really is, and what it means.

the holes left by the nails. He wants to put his hand in the gash made by the spear in Jesus's side.

A little morbid, is it not? He wants to see *and touch* the wounds of Jesus.

A little morbid? Perhaps. Or, perhaps, Thomas knows something the other disciples do not know. Perhaps Thomas has a sense of what resurrection is, and is not.

Perhaps Thomas knows this: that resurrection is not reversal. Resurrection is not reversal. Resurrection is not a turning back of the clock to time before.

How often we wish we could do that, of course: Turn back the clock to the time before the accident. Turn back the clock to the months before the cancer diagnosis, before the argument, before the divorce, before the death. Turn back the clock so we can somehow do it differently this time, do it *right* this time, and avoid the heartache.

We wish we could turn back the clock to the time before so that we could avoid the heartache, avoid death altogether, even. I am reminded of Sandy, a friend of mine who was a devout believer from an early age. Sandy was raised in the Presbyterian church, where all the crosses in the sanctuary were empty and plain. She never saw a crucifix, a cross with Jesus's body on it, until as a five-year-old, she attended a wedding at a Catholic church. Waiting for the ceremony to begin, Sandy sat quietly in the pew with her mother and gazed up in horror at the bloody, twisted body of Jesus hanging on the cross above the altar. And then, after staring at the crucifix for a while, this little girl who loved Jesus stood up in her pew and cried out, "Jump, Jesus! Jump!"

But resurrection is not an avoidance of or escape from death. Resurrection is not a turning back of the clock to time before. Resurrection is not reversal. Resurrection is life out of death, life through death, life on the other side of death.

I think Thomas wants to touch the wounds of Jesus because he wants to be sure that this is not some ghost, some apparition. Thomas wants to be sure that this is really Jesus.

Thomas knows that resurrection is not reversal. It is not putting things back to the way they were before. The Jesus who comes to be with the disciples in that room is not identical to the Jesus who was taken away from them in the garden of Gethsemane. Now, etched into his flesh are the wounds from nails and spear. Jesus *died* on that cross, and no one—not even God—can erase that death.

Resurrection is not reversal. Resurrection is life out of death, life through death, life on the other side of death. Easter comes only after Good Friday. You cannot have the joy of Easter morning without the lament of Good Friday.

Good Friday has special significance for me. From a young age, I could not understand why so many people came to church on Easter who weren't there on Good Friday. How could they know or experience the full joy of Easter morning if they had not experienced the darkness and sorrow of Good Friday? As the self-appointed "chaplain" of my high school youth group, and with the blessing of our very patient pastor, I devised an Easter sunrise service that began with the church darkened and silent, then moved into the Easter proclamation, "Christ is risen!"

And at that proclamation, we turned on the lights and lit the candles and sang the great Easter hymns. Though we knew nothing of the Easter Vigil service at that point, it was our youth group's attempt to capture something of the relationship between Good Friday and Easter. You cannot have one without the other.

Good Friday continues to have special significance for me. On Good Friday nineteen years ago, I woke up in labor with our first child, a week before her due date. Good Friday is an appropriate time to be in labor, as new life comes out of great pain and suffering. Esther Anna Marie was born in the wee hours of Holy Saturday, and she was and is a living experience of Easter for me and my husband.

On another Good Friday, four years later, I found out at a routine prenatal checkup that the baby I had been carrying for more than four months—the baby I had seen moving on an ultrasound image just a few weeks before—no longer had a heartbeat.

“In the midst of life, we are in death.” That phrase from the funeral service in the *Book of Common Prayer* took on new meaning for me later that Good Friday as I sat in the back of the darkened sanctuary and wept, carrying death within me.

Resurrection is not reversal, not a turning back of the clock to time before. Jesus died on that cross on Good Friday. And in spite of Paul's proclamation in 1 Corinthians 15, death still does have a sting. Death still has power, power enough to stop a beating heart, power to break a heart.

Death has power. And death leaves its mark. Death leaves its mark in Jesus's very flesh, in the wounds, the scars that Thomas wants to touch. Death leaves its mark in us as well. The scars remain. We all know that. The scars remain, the physical scars of our bodies and the scars no one sees: the scars of abuse, the scars of suffering, of keenly felt disappointment, of depression, the scars of grief. Death leaves its mark, in our souls as well as in our bodies.

But the good news is this: God does not erase those scars. Resurrection is not reversal. Resurrection is life out of death. Life in spite of death. Life through death. God does not erase those scars. God in Christ takes them into God's own body. God knows our suffering, and bears our scars.

And thanks be to God, who raises us today and every day with Christ, with our scarred bodies and souls, to new life!

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . . If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. (Rom 6:5, 8)

Such is the Easter proclamation, and it has power to give us hope and confidence in the face of death itself.

Let's go back to Thomas, the Show-Me man. When Jesus comes to him and shows him his scars, Thomas proclaims, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). And Jesus says to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (v. 29).

John tells this story of Doubting Thomas in order to reassure the second and third generations of Christians, those who did not have the privilege of seeing Jesus themselves, who believed through the witness of Thomas, John, Peter, Mary, and the other eyewitnesses. But have you noticed? We are also in this story! We are among those who “have not seen and yet have come to believe.” We are not eyewitnesses. We are not the second generation of Christians. We are not even probably the hundredth generation of Christians. We are far removed in space and time from those eyewitnesses, from Jesus himself.

And yet, we believe. In our best moments, we believe. Not because we have seen Jesus, not because we have touched his scars, but because we have been touched by him, because we have experienced that new life that is ours through him.

Pope John Paul II described our situation this way: “We are an Easter people, and ‘Alleluia’ is our song.”² We are an Easter people and “Alleluia” is our song.

The St. Olaf Choir was singing a song once whose only text was the word “Alleluia” sung over and over and over again.³ As I recall the story, their director at the time, Kenneth Jennings, told them to think about it this way: From the dawn of creation, from the beginning of time, there has been a song of Alleluia sung continuously.⁴ We can’t always hear it. It is often drowned out by the noise around us and within us. But this song of Alleluia is going on even now and will continue to the end of time and beyond. All we are doing is making the Alleluias audible.

That is our task as well. Living in this new life, living as an Easter people, scarred and battered though we may be, we gather as a community just as the disciples did around the table of the Lord, and we make the Alleluias audible. We make the Alleluias audible by working against everything that is death-dealing in us and in the world. We make the Alleluias audible by witnessing to what God is doing in this world and thereby drawing others into this Easter life.

We make the Alleluias audible sometimes, if truth be told, under our breath, sometimes through tears. Death still has a sting. Death still deals strong blows, and at times the Alleluias are all but drowned out. But we continue to sing because God continues to raise us through death to new life. We sing because we are an Easter people and Alleluia is our song!

We are not Thomas, or Peter, or Mary, or John. We are not among the eyewitnesses of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. But we have believed because of their witness, and our faith has been kindled by that same Spirit that Jesus breathed on his disciples.

We are not Thomas, or Peter, or Mary, or John. But we join with them and with all those who were gathered in that room so long ago. We join with all the

² Sometimes attributed to St. Augustine, this sentence was spoken by Pope John Paul II in a speech in Harlem, October 1979. The full speech can be read at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1979/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19791002_usa-neri-america_en.html.

³ Randall Thompson, “Alleluia.”

⁴ See, for instance, Job 38:7, where God describes the founding of the earth, “when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy.”

saints of every time and every place in singing “Alleluia!” Together with them we proclaim that our Lord and our God is alive and raises us out of death to new life. Resurrection is not reversal. We live with wounds, we live with scars, but we live also in the new life of baptism, knowing that the same God who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead has taken on *our* pain, *our* wounds, *our* death—and somehow, out of that death, works life in us, both now and for the age to come. For that reason, we as an Easter people can proclaim:

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! ☩

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