

## **Doubting Thomas Sunday: Hitting Bottom**

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**St. Mary the Virgin**

**Easter 2, April 11, 2021**

**John** <sup>19</sup>It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." <sup>22</sup>Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven." <sup>24</sup>Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe." <sup>26</sup>After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" <sup>28</sup>Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup>Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." <sup>30</sup>Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. <sup>31</sup>But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

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This is doubting Thomas Sunday. It is a Sunday in which we're reminded that just because we know that Easter is the big event, most of the world does not. Clearly the fact that you're here shows that you understand something about Easter that many of those who observed Easter last week do not.

What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is risen? How does that make our lives different?

Most scholarship errs seriously in assuming that Jews were persecuting Christians. I mention this because the Gospel begins: *When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.* Much mischief over the centuries has been done to Jews because of this and other negative references to Jews in John.

There is no First Century proof that Jewish Christians were expelled from the synagogue despite all that you may have read or heard about that. My study leads me to conclude that this Gospel says “Jews” so much precisely because there were so few of them in Asia Minor where John lived. This is a common ploy in the bible. Jonah talks about Assyrians centuries after they were gone because it was dangerous to talk about Babylonians or Persians. Revelation talks about Babylon centuries after it disappeared because it was dangerous to talk about Rome. I propose that John, writing in Asia Minor, talks about Jews, who were absent or powerless, precisely because he could not talk about the Romans or Hellenists who exercised real power. This is a radical statement but important because we have so frequently used the Gospel to discriminate against Jews.

The disciples had not a clue about the power of the resurrection and were still living in fear of the Ruler of This World. They were ruled by FEAR. Despite having accompanied Jesus on his ministry and hearing him predict his passion, they were ruled by fear. They fled from the public.

I am convinced that the Ruler of This World is real whether we call it evil, Satan or the Devil. I use these terms interchangeably. Evil wishes one thing for us and that is that we find ourselves alone, insecure and doubting all hope. In other words Satan wants us in the Upper Room without hope. There are many ways in which the Devil works to isolate us, for instance by class, gender, sexuality, race, merit, nationalism, etc. It is life lived in fear, especially fear of loss. We imagine that John tells this story, many decades after the Resurrection, because Jesus had not returned as had been expected. Christians were dying before the Second Coming, the Parousia. Maybe the message as recorded by Paul and the gospels was wrong? How could they know? They had lost hope and were in spiritual pain.

John in his Gospel tells us a story of the disciples to speak to the sense of doubt and hopelessness his contemporaries face. We read that the disciples<sup>1</sup> gathered together in a small place and Jesus appeared to them. They didn't know that it was Jesus until he showed them his wounds. Then he speaks to them and gives them the authority to begin the church. At this moment they began to recover from their bottom. It is, apparently, important that Jesus appears to be a human being. He has no halo, no wings, no divine countenance. The Risen Lord did not appear to be other worldly. It took the Word for him to be recognized. He had to identify himself.

The disciples are in spiritual pain. This malady involves the loss of a sense of self and who one is. The disciples are depicted as meeting in the room out of habit. They had grown comfortable in each other's company. They were nostalgic for the good old days. They did not see anything in the future which would equal what they had experienced in the past. The disease of nostalgia is a disease of losing a sense of hope in the future. Despair reigns. They are in spiritual pain.

We live in a society which denies the reality of spiritual pain. Many of us have nostalgic memories of the past and it cripples us. I believe that it is important for us to

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<sup>1</sup> John's Gospel never uses the designation: Apostle.

embrace spiritual pain as a reality and see it as an opportunity for growth. Walter Brueggemann, my favorite biblical theologian, points out that the lament psalms follow the pattern of stability, chaos, a cry for a return to former stability, and the granting of a new reality. The cry for a return to former stability, which may have been the goal of the Upper Room, is always denied. We cannot go back to what we were. The Church, including this church, will never again be what it was 10 years ago, or pre-covid or what it was in the 1960s. We may be something much truer to Christianity, we may flourish, but it will be in a new way. We are on a one-way trip to what can be an exciting future.

We are in spiritual pain. We have no idea what the church will look like in the immediate future. Research that I read in March<sup>2</sup> points out that Americans are attending church less and less. Most people in this country never attend church and don't feel guilty about it. That can be discouraging news but what if we realize that, since most people don't attend church, we have a fertile mission field to get out and plow? The country is in spiritual crisis. The presidential election is characterized by resignation, not hope. Many, most especially white men, are aware of what the changes in society have cost them and they feel a sense of loss. They, my cohort of Wasp Men, wonder: Why isn't the church upholding the values that everyone once took for granted? They wonder: Why must we be open to people who are different from us? In the 50s and 60s when churches were booming we didn't worry about these issues. To those who long for the past these issues are a distraction. That's longing to go back to a past which will never happen again.

These issues are also very real products of our being faithful to the Gospel. The Gospel knows no distinctions between us and doesn't tolerate our artificial insistence upon them. We are ordinary people. The Risen Lord when he appeared in the Upper Room appeared as an ordinary brown man. He proclaimed Good News and the disciples shed their despair and went out and preached the word to the world. We are the heirs of their preaching.

Walter Brueggemann assures us that the future may be better than the past, or it may be worse, but it will not be the same. Easter changed the world for the disciples. Our society has gotten more secular but the need for spiritual solace has not diminished. Our society has gotten more cynical, but the need for the truth has not gone away. Our society has gotten lost, but there is a map to a better future. We read of how isolated we are, especially white men. The Gospel is the solution. We are not powerless. We can renew intimacy with those closest to us. We can study, read, be present in ways we could not before. We are not powerless. There is much we can do to make things worse and a simple thing we can do to make a future possible. A new future will not be a restoration of life as it was pre-pandemic or in the 50s and 60s.

I have no idea what it will be, but it will be different because our world has changed. The pandemic changed us. Civil Rights, Feminism, the appreciation of LGBTQ

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<sup>2</sup> An interesting article on the implications of this was published yesterday:

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/04/05/trump-religion-secularism-authoritarian-populism/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=newsletter&wpsrc=nl\\_opinions&utm\\_campaign=wp\\_opinions](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/04/05/trump-religion-secularism-authoritarian-populism/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpsrc=nl_opinions&utm_campaign=wp_opinions)

rights has changed us. This shared experience has made us different. Can we reach out to powerlessness wherever we find it? Can we understand that a core principle of Christianity is standing with the powerless and helping them find meaning? I believe in Christianity that our God can redeem anything. God can redeem the despair and hopelessness that many are facing. Will we accept the gift and respond by caring for the vulnerable? Can the pandemic transfer the capital C church into a community that cares above all for the vulnerable? Have we learned that lesson about Christianity?

How then did Jesus appear to the disciples and especially to Doubting Thomas? We don't know. But what we do know is that they did not recognize Jesus until he spoke to them. The Evangelists show this to be true in every appearance story. Jesus could not be discerned, even by those who knew him when he lived, until he disclosed himself. The Gospels are telling us that we cannot recognize the presence of Jesus in our midst until it is pointed out to us. It is not our initiative, devotion or intelligence which discovers Jesus, it is Jesus's self-revelation. Where then do we find this self-revelation today? We find it in a community which is not afraid to point out how Jesus continues to operate in its midst, the church with the vulnerable. We find it by observing how others find hope in their lives, and believing that there is the possibility of hope in ours.

Happy Easter.