

Grace, Peace and Love to you from our Risen Savior,

I was talking about this week's Gospel reading with Pastor John, and something had occurred to me. I was reflecting on how the magic of holidays disappears slowly for us when we are children when we stop believing in that magic. Today is my mother's birthday, and we would be celebrating it today. My father would be joking that she was as old as he again, and there would be laughter and fellowship still today. And as she has passed, it is on days like today, and knowing that I was giving the message on my mother's birthday, that I am filled with memories. So please pardon me if I relate some of those memories here today, that I think will fit into the message. Parents may want to cover the ears of their children for this.

I remember when I lost my first tooth as a child, I was given a pillow by my mother to tuck the tooth into that way it would be easy for the tooth fairy to find. The pillow was hand made by my mother, and was shaped like a tooth, and had a little pocket in the front in which to tuck the tooth. I was informed that the tooth fairy would be providing me some coinage for that tooth, and it was the most magical experience. The shiny quarter that I received in exchange for the tooth had never seemed so bright, and might as well have been made of pure silver in my youthful eyes, and nothing could have been as special to me. Looking back on this, the pure belief of a child, completely without guile or worry, is what I think of when I hear the words of Jesus in today's text.

I think as well on the stories my wife has told me of growing up in the church, and how earnestly she prayed for her family, especially her mother who couldn't attend church with them because of her baby brother, and I think as well of my own childhood and vacation bible school, and how easy the belief came to me when I was a child. Because I was cared for and sheltered and safe, kept that way by my parents who had made sacrifices to wrap me in that safe world, and who had allowed me to experience the magic without worry for the problems. When you have not yet taken a bite of the fruit of knowledge, faith is easy to have.

Unfortunately, most of us become a lot more like Thomas as we grow up. Once bitten twice shy is an adage that we are all familiar with, and after I woke one time to find my father tucking a Susan B. Anthony dollar into the pocket of the tooth pillow, my skepticism about the magic of these events began to grow. I had been hearing rumors to that effect around school of course, other kids wiser and not as sheltered as I was had been more than eager to spill the beans, and it was not long until the magic of childhood withered away completely. The tooth fairy had become a lot less magical and more like a bartered exchange, and if the tooth fairy was not real, could Santa really slide down a chimney. I mean our house had a chimney, but not every house had a chimney. Similarly the Easter bunny, and what do rabbits have to do with eggs or chocolate anyhow. When you lose your faith the world can seem a lot less magical.

And so it is with us as well. When we demand to see scientific, verifiable, documented proof of our salvation through the sacrifice of our risen Lord, we lose the magic of faith. Jesus has not appeared to me for me to stick my fingers into his wounded palms, nor my hand into his pierced side. And so I have had to build my faith through other means. I have had to study the Bible and I have had to attend worship services in many a church. I have had to grow up in my faith and had to make my own choices in allowing Jesus to enter into my heart. I have had to set aside my natural skepticism, and accept that there are things that I might not understand, but still know them to be true. And there is magic in that as well. For if you look at it in comparison, the faith of a child can be a fickle thing, easily shattered, for it is not based on anything real. The faith of an adult is more reasoned, built on a foundation of rock so to speak. The rock of the scripture, the fellowship of fellow believers, and more than that the acceptance of Jesus into our own hearts. In seeing the change that that acceptance can make in our own lives, and then in the lives of those around us. I have lived without the peace of salvation in my heart, I have gone through that darkness, and it is not a place to which I wish to return.

Many would look on the story of Thomas as a negative, and I certainly do not wish to do that here. I am trying to make plain that I see Thomas in myself. I have doubts, and I have fears, and I give into those fears as well. If I had seen the death of Jesus on the cross, been hunted and persecuted by the zealots of the day, I have no doubt that I would have been Thomas in that situation. And so it is today as well, when surrounded by those that call into question the faith and belief, when people ask “How could God allow this to happen in the world?” or looking back on the past year of living with the Pandemic, it would be too easy to be Thomas and say, “Nope, not gonna believe again until I see Him for myself.” It would be too easy to look around and see the diaspora of belief systems, and then see the battling between those people and say, “Not until I put my fingers in the holes the nails left.” To see men and women of faith who turn their backs on those in need because they look different or act different or believe differently than they do and say, “Not until I put my hand in his wounded side.”

I do not know if it was in relation to doubting Thomas that I first heard this story, but I think it makes some sense in that context. There was once a man, a skeptic like most of us are at times in our lives. He was walking along a mountain trail when the edge gave way and he fell over. Scrambling he reached out for a branch, and his hand caught one. It was a thin branch, but it seemed to support his weight, but he was unable to climb to safety on his own. The man said, “God, when I grew up, I stopped believing in you because I couldn't see you, but if you save me, I will know you are there. If you want me to believe in you, save me now.” At that moment a hiker passing on the trail saw the peril the man was in and tossed a rope down to the man, urging him to grasp it so he could haul him up. “No,” the man said, refusing to grasp the rope, “God will save me if he wants me to be saved.” A ranger had seen the man fall off the trail and came running

up with rescue equipment, lowering a basket on a winch, urging the man to take the help, and the man said again, "No, if I am meant to be saved, God will save me." I could go on with the story, but the point has been made I think, at least in the context of Thomas.

The man was just like Thomas and just like us. We are demanding to see Jesus in the way we want to see Jesus, not in the way that he might be appearing. We are refusing to accept the good news because it was not spoken directly to us, but because we are hearing it second hand. Just because it is a hiker, or a park ranger that is rescuing us, is it not a miracle in itself that they happened to be passing along at the moment of our peril. The miracle of the story lies not in the doubt of Thomas, for if we tell ourselves the truth, that same doubt lies in the heart of each of us at times. No the miracle of today's lesson is in the fact that Jesus appeared at the table a second time, to offer his hands and side to Thomas so that he might also believe.

And so it is that the last words of Jesus in the passage ring as true today as they did to Thomas. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." We may no longer be able to have the faith of children. We will always be looking for the wizard behind the curtain. We will be assailed by doubts and fears, and like the fishermen the original disciples were, at times our boat will rock in stormy weather. But, just as it was for Thomas, at our moment of need, Jesus is always there, and he will show us his wounded hands and side if we open our hearts and minds to salvation. And that is the part of the story that is the most important, and the lesson that we can take away from today's Gospel. And my friends, that is magic enough for me.