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A STATE OF PERMANENT PRE-HOSTILITY?

Are you a doubting Thomas? I remember hearing this once from a fellow seminary student when I questioned something in class, and he did not mean it as a compliment. I responded by saying that in the church of the future, I thought we ought to consider making doubt into one of the sacraments.

I mean, why should we only celebrate what we think we know? Why not question everything we are taught as a compliment to God, who keeps making all things new? Hasn't every great advance for civilization been preceded by doubt? The theologians and prophets we admire today all doubted the truth they had inherited and so now we call them visionaries. Great scientists are doubters by nature, and we are all healthier and happier because of it. When Galileo first began to doubt that the sun and the stars all revolve around the earth, he was condemned for doubting what the church had always taught people to believe.

There's a difference between doubt and cynicism, of course, and what I'm talking about is a form of intellectual curiosity and those who fearlessly follow it. In a church where doubt is a sacrament, Thomas would be its patron saint. The disciples said, "we have seen the Lord," but Thomas said, "prove it." And of course, there is nothing the disciples can say in answer to this because they can't prove it, and so the writer of John's gospel creates this beautiful story in which Jesus does not respond to his doubt with condemnation, but comes back for a kind of resurrection encore just so that Thomas might believe. In one of the most compelling and oft-quoted lines in scripture, he is invited to reach out and touch his hands and side.

Don't you imagine that John wrote his gospel in the midst of many who were saying exactly the same thing? Show me the proof and I will believe. John's gospel is written in the midst of the divorce of the early church from Judaism, and you can hear the rhetoric of this feud in lines

like, “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.” Later in the crucifixion scene, it won’t be the crowd that shouts out “Crucify him!” but “the Jews” who call for his blood. Thus, sadly, John’s gospel has contributed to centuries of anti-Semitism.

And this story raises all sorts of questions that have been debated for centuries, beginning with why Thomas was absent for the first appearances, like – *where was he?* That’s his problem, after all – you’ve got to show up for life. This makes me think of my students. They are always asking me why they don’t know stuff that we discussed in class on the day they were absent! Thomas was a no-show, absent on the day when the teacher was teaching, and then has the audacity to hold out for a kind of private audience with the risen Christ. Perhaps he has a healthy dose of that disease now rampant in American culture: it’s all about me.

But I believe that the most revealing line in the story comes at the end, when Jesus says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe”

John’s gospel is written as late as 90 or 100 AD, two generations or more removed from the death of Jesus. He has not returned, as the disciples believed that he would. In fact, his failure to return is the foremost problem of the New Testament. So John writes his gospel on behalf of a church that is growing uneasy and full of doubt. Thomas is not just a solitary figure in the story, but a constant problem in the early church. Where’s the proof of the resurrection? Show us, if you expect us to believe.

And so John’s story pronounces a blessing upon those who have not seen and yet believed – which means on everybody in the church, since the first, and now the first generation of apostles is gone, and the second is dying. And in so doing he tries to hold the church together against its most familiar and formidable enemy: *doubt*. To this day, I hear people say that they would like to be part of a church, and participate in the wisdom and transformation that is true Christianity, but they still have too many doubts.

I would prefer those people as members over those who claim to be certain about everything. Certainty scares me much more than doubt. Fundamentalists are certain about everything and the results can be deadly. But doubt is not only healthy, and shows respect for truth as yet undiscovered, but doubt is what makes faith itself possible. When the possibility of doubt is gone the possibility of faith is gone.

Unfortunately, faith has so long been defined as what one can say that one “believes” in terms of giving unquestioned allegiance to some propositional statement that in England, for example, to this day, a person of faith is called “a believer.” But faith in the early church wasn’t

about believing in the virgin birth or the blood atonement. It was about a radical, trans-rational trust in the spirit of Jesus to sustain a new beloved community of his followers in the world.

What is much more significant to me in this story is the gift that Jesus brings. He does not appear to the disciples in order to prove that he is risen, but in order to give something to the disciples that they must have to survive in the Empire. His message is not: see and believe, but rather this: *Peace be with you*. Which I understand to mean, in a larger sense: *Do not be afraid*. The oldest and greatest enemy of human life, death itself, is not to be feared. What will baffle the world of death is the power of those who do not fear it. And this peace I give you is not the peace that Rome gives you – the *Pax Romana*, the so-called “peace of Rome.”

It was a peace purchased through violence, intimidation, and fear. It was made possible by the first-century equivalent of “shock and awe.” Rome was a colossus astride the world, and they made all their provinces into indentured servants. Then they did what all great powers do – they declared their violence to be sanctified, and their Caesar to be the son of God. Worship him and he will protect you. These are Roman Family Values which our politicians have never tired of adapting. In short, daddy knows best, and even when he doesn’t, you should act like he does.

At Kent State in 1970, National Guard troops opened fire on a group of anti-Vietnam war demonstrators and killed four students – two of whom were not in the protest at all, but were hit by bullets as they walked across campus to class. It happened when I was a senior in high school. Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young wrote a song about it . . . *Four Dead in Ohio*.

But my son Cass, who is 16, hears much worse news every morning on the radio on the way to school. Another suicide bombing, another kidnapping, another bombing gone bad with collateral damage, that most insidious of all euphemisms. And the message that soaks in is this: this is the way the world is and this is the way the world works. It’s the price we pay to be free, and there is no other way. Peace is really just the space between violent events, and the longer the space the more peace we have. So peace on earth, according to the Pentagon’s official definition, is a state of “permanent pre-hostility.”

But this is not the peace that Jesus was talking about. He stepped into history and stood in front of the tank that was the Roman Empire, and the driver of the tank said, “Run over him! He’s a misfit and a dreamer. You can’t have peace if you turn the other cheek. Freedom isn’t free.”

So what was this “peace” that Jesus promised? Is it just an inner state of calm in the midst of the storm? Is it a trust that transcends the moment, a hope that is more powerful than mere optimism?

When Jesus appears to his disciples in John's gospel he adds something very interesting. "I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

At the end of Paul's letters, the great missionary apostle closes by saying, "the peace of God be with you." And to this day, if you are worshiping in the high church tradition (Catholic or Episcopalian), and you say this, "the peace of God be with you" that won't be the end of it. Whoever hears you will say right back, "And also with you." It's called the "passing of the peace."

But if we're going to pass it, then I think we should try to understand what it is. Is it just the absence of noise, as when we put "peace and quiet" together? Is it a form of escape, as when "The world is too much with us," as Wordsworth would say, and so we leave the big city and go to the country to get a little peace.

Or is peace a commodity of sorts in the land of capitalism – where almost everything is for sale. Parents will often say, "When the kids leave, we'll have some peace." They'll be on their own – the happy little campers – but that never happens. Rumor has it that as long as you are alive, your kids are your kids.

Maybe there will be peace when our ship comes in, or in the case of a cruise, when our ship puts out: ah yes – shuffle board, sunsets, eating whenever you like. Is that peace? Is peace a form of perpetual recreation?

Let try this. Let's do a little word play, a little free associating. I say "peace," and you think what? I must admit that one of the first things that comes to my mind is the cabin in Colorado, which is holy ground in my family. If you say peace, I think, end of a summer day in Green Mountain Falls, spaghetti and red wine on the deck (I'm not much of a gourmet when it comes to food, having been raised to believe that Chef Boy-R-Dee was a saint). . .It's cool, we dig out the old sweaters, put our feet up on the deck railing, and gaze up at the mountain in search of eagles swooping – that's peace, isn't it?

Or how about this? Everyone has left the beach . . . all the kids with their pails and dogs and people working hard on their skin cancer (I mean their tan) . . . and the sun is like a giant flaming ball sizzling its way into the ocean. The waves have rocked us all day. They start out high and angry, but as they draw near they begin to giggle and fall down, and by the time they reach your feet, they have rolled over and turned into foam. You scratch their soft underbelly with your bare feet, and then they run laughing back out to sea. Is that peace?

Or how about this. Sometimes, I like to roll up my pant legs and pretend that I'm Huck Finn, and there's no sermon to write, no class to prepare for, no papers to grade, no grass to cut, no unfinished business hanging over me. To have nothing at all that one *has* to do – complete freedom from responsibility – is that peace?

Or how about this – your child is sick. The fever is rising. You put a cool washcloth on the head, give aspirin, sing a lullaby, but it's still rising. You call the doctor. How much aspirin can I give? Then, at 3 o'clock in the morning, the fever breaks, the breathing is clear and steady again, and you slip into bed and curl up into a fetal position of thankfulness. That's peace. Isn't it?

Or how about this. My students always like this one. The alarm goes off and you jump out of bed. You stumble over things you dropped by the bedside and think, "Oh, my goodness, I'm late for work, I'm late for class, the office can't run without me . . . and then it hits you. It's Saturday! And you crawl back into bed and think to yourself is this not the best kind of sleep there is? That's peace, isn't it?"

Not really. All these things are good. But I don't think that's what Jesus was talking about. I know what serenity feels like. I know what comfort feels like. I know what gratitude feels like. But I'm still working on peace. We're all still working on peace – especially the kind that the church says "passes all understanding."

When Paul talks about peace, he knows that his life may not end on his terms, and when he asks for prayer, he uses the Greek word that means literally to "agonize with me." And yet he finds, in the midst of it all, peace.

Let me ask you something, just to reassure myself perhaps that I am not the only one? Are you tired hearing about Tiger Woods? Do you feel as if you are being asked to participate in a choreographed media spectacle of redemption so that we can get back to business as usual?

Don't get me wrong, I'm as hopeful as anyone that Tiger can straighten out his life and be the husband and father his family needs. But it makes me very nervous when corporations like Nike begin to produce commercials that make it appear as if Tiger's father is speaking to his son from the grave, asking him what he has learned, when it's really an audio clip from an interview his dad gave about his wife, Tiger's mom, that has been cleverly dubbed over a picture of Tiger looking pensive and a little frightened, like a deer caught in the headlights, and the message, (oddly like Jesus appearing to Thomas so he will "get it") is this: Our hero has *learned from his mistakes* and he will analyze his personal demons and his sexual compulsion (whether real or therapeutically justified as sex addiction) like the true champion he is.

But don't kid yourself. This isn't about forgiveness and redemption. This is about the restoration of a brand. Tiger Woods actually shares something in common with Goldman Sachs, and all those other banks we bailed out after they nearly destroyed the country. We have determined, by some bazaar and self-serving logic, that he is an athlete who is *too big to fail*. And what's more, that as a celebrity in a celebrity culture, his excesses are the object of both fascination and then the machinery of pseudo-redemption. And what is the real message that comes through this process? That the opposite of justice is entitlement—that the world works differently for the rich and powerful, so that even their mistakes become part of a marketing strategy.

I agree with Shawn when she says that the real news this week are those miners trapped in another coal mine disaster because a company that puts profits over people has killed more of its own workers. And while more people watched Tiger tee off at the Masters on Thursday than had ever watched any other single golf shot in the history of the world, real history was being made when the President of the United States signed an historic arms reduction agreement with Russia.

Meanwhile the war in Afghanistan, which is now the longest war in American history, is going so badly that we'd rather not think about it at all. We have no achievable military objective, nobody knows what victory would look like, and the designated driver we installed as president, Hamid Karzai, has decided to ride with the Taliban and drive his country off a cliff. All of this to make the world safer? That's why doubt ought to be a sacrament in the church – because instead of blessing our soldiers we need to bring them home. Another Vietnam is looming while we are amusing ourselves to death.

Now you may be wondering about now what all this has to do with the peace that Jesus promises to his followers. Precisely that it is not a form of neutral energy he is offering, or an investment strategy for retirement, or a way to withdraw from the world and pretend that someone else can solve our problems for us.

In this story, Thomas is asked to touch the *wounded* body of Christ – not his perfectly restored body. This is not a peace that prevents pain, but one that triumphs over it. It's not the peace that comes from running away from the world, and its treachery and deceit, but rather the peace that comes from moving more deeply into that pain.

Those coal miners are gone, and if you are a person with an imagination, then you can only hope they died instantly, and not waiting in the darkness for their last breath, buried alive. And yet, for some reason that defies all logic and compassion, Massey Energy will not be shut down. It will still get to operate unsafe mines because mining in West Virginia is all there is, so mining

is too big to fail. Massey will hire a PR firm to make commercials expressing their deep regret, promising to do better in the future, and the tag line will go something like this: “Nothing matters more to Massey Energy than the safety of our workers. We’re all family here, and this is what we do.” And everyone will get misty eyed and go back to work.

On a warm summer night in July 1969, I walked outside and looked up at the moon and there was a man walking on it. And all I can remember thinking is: I hope they make it back home. And if we can do this, we can do anything.

Such is the optimism of youth, because the war to end all wars did not end war. The race riots that had torn our cities the year before did not cure the racism that still grows like a malignant tumor on our body politic. Nixon had been elected on promises he could not keep and was planning to stay in power no matter what he needed to do to destroy his enemies.

Meanwhile, in my home church we were singing hymns and praying for peace. But we were still slaves to the Empire. We put down Thomas for doubting, but we should have questioned everything we were being told.

If you want to know what peace is, and what redemption is, I suggest that you make a date to hear two modern peace-makers. The first is Ishmael Beah, the boy soldier turned peace activist from Sierra Leone, graduate of Oberlin College and author of the bestselling book, *A Long Way Gone*, who will speak this Wednesday evening at OCU in the Distinguished Speakers Series, beginning at 7:30 pm in the Petree Auditorium; and then a week later, on Wednesday afternoon April 21st, at 4 pm at the university of Oklahoma, go to hear Greg Mortenson. That event has grown so large that it’s been moved to the Lloyd Nobel Center. He is the author of *Three Cups of Tea*, and the man who builds schools in Afghanistan so that the worst kind of collateral damage (which is uneducated and thus forgotten children) is reduced. As to a military solution, he is a doubting Thomas, which is why we ought to consider him for sainthood.

In the meantime, let’s not forget that the peace we are promised has nothing to do with blind allegiance, nor does it mean we stop doubting. It is a tough, resilient, even joyful embrace of the world as it is, and a determination to do what we can, where we are, with what we have, to make it better.

The burning bush of Oklahoma is the redbud. A light to the people is this church. Peace is possible if we rehabilitate enough boy soldiers, and educate enough girls. So in the ancient tradition of the beloved community, let me say it, and ask you to respond:

“The peace of God be with you . . . ”



Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, April 11, 2010

Lord of Life, we come to this place with more questions than answers, and with more pain than comfort. We come with uncertainty about tomorrow, and doubts about our place in the world, or whether we can do anything to change it.

We fret over our bodies, as if preserving them is the holiest of obligations and over our children as if they must always be a walking, talking advertisement for our gene pool and our parenting skills.

We wonder if our loved ones still love us, or only need us, or whether there are greener pastures than the one we are standing in. We long for perfection in an imperfect world, and more than our share in a world where too many have less than theirs.

We come because it is easy to stay busy, but hard to slow down. Easy to be ambitious, but more difficult to be contemplative. Easy to be optimistic, but hard to be hopeful.

Whatever the reason why we came this morning, we ask for the blessing that is community, and the peace that passes all understanding. Because if we leave this place with such a blessing, we will not be able to stay away.

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our Teacher and Lord we pray, Amen.