

Sermons at St. Paul's

A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name

**April 11, 2010, The Second Sunday of Easter
The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane**

In the name of our Risen Lord. Amen.

Today I get another chance to continue my annual, Sunday-after-Easter campaign to rename Doubting Thomas “Thomas the Faithful”. You see, the more time I spend with today’s story from the Gospel of John, the more I’m convinced that Thomas, of all the apostles, had it right. It was Thomas who first understood who Jesus was and what it meant to follow him. Thomas doesn’t show us doubt, but the importance of clinging firmly to the truth of who God is and stubbornly refusing to bow down before any counterfeits. Thomas is my model for faithful discipleship.

More about that in a minute. First, I want to tell you a story about my grandfather. His name was Richard, but I called him Goddy. It was the best my 2-year-old self could do to pronounce the word “granddaddy”. Goddy always joked that he enjoyed the divine status this nickname gave him. My grandfather was a big man, with a big laugh, and a commanding presence. He was also wheelchair bound, paralyzed as the result of the polio he contracted as a college senior.

Goddy had envisioned a career in sports, and might, indeed, have played professional football, had he not become ill. He nearly lost his life to polio, and when he recovered, the news that he would never walk again was itself a kind of death—the death of his dreams. I will never know what it cost him, but, in time, Goddy became a teacher, a football coach, and eventually the headmaster of Quaker high school. His own experience of disappointment, death, reorientation and redefining what it meant to lead a whole and meaningful life allowed him to help countless others—students and colleagues alike—to find their own power, meaning and place in the world. Through his handicap, he helped many to find wholeness. In his woundedness, he touched and healed many lives.

I, of course, only came to understand all this as an adult. As a child, Goddy was simply my grandfather, the person I most loved to be with. I loved to sit on his lap—on a big red corduroy pillow to cushion me from the hard metal of his leg braces—as he told me stories. I loved to ride around campus with him in his golf-cart, as he called out to students—he knew all their names—as he went. I loved the feel of his huge hands—callused from the grips of his wooden crutches—when they wrapped around mine. With him, I was completely safe and loved. There was nothing we could not do together. His disability was part of what made him who he was; I never experienced him as disabled. He was just Goddy and he was at the center of my world.

I remember one time when I overheard Goddy telling my grandmother about a dream that he had had the night before. In it, he said, his body was whole and strong and he was running. (As an adult, I’ve come back to that memory often, and thought about what a powerful vision my

grandfather's dream was of the resurrection of the body and the hope of eternal life.) But as a 5 year old, I was outraged. Goddy? Without crutches and a wheel chair? I could not imagine who that person could possibly be. Goddy's handicaps were part of what made him who he was. They were why he was who he was. To imagine him without his paralysis was an affront. To a child whose God-image was tied up with her beloved grandfather, such an image was almost, well, blasphemy.

Perhaps for this reason, I have always found the image of the wounded Christ—not the bloody crucified Christ, but the risen Christ, alive, present, transformed, but still bearing the wounds of the cross—a very powerful one. His wounds say to me that Jesus' earthly life of love and compassion and healing cost him something. In sharing life with us, he understood and took on our woundedness. In coming close to those who suffer, he, too suffered. In living as a true human being, he also died a human death. In teaching us to love, he loved us to the end. It is important to me that in his new, resurrected life, Jesus still bears the marks of his incarnation. Jesus' resurrection does not undo all that led to his death. His new and unending life in God—as firstborn of the dead, faithful witness and ruler of the kings of the earth, to use the language of Revelation—still bears evidence of the cost. God raised him, wounds and all, to new life. Jesus shows me that God's love cost God something, and still does.

And I think, too, that's why I find Thomas such a sympathetic person in John's story. Thomas, too, found Christ's wounds important. Thomas understood when he began to follow Jesus that doing so was costly business. He understood better than most of Jesus' disciples that Jesus' work of forgiving sins, restoring sight, health and life, teaching us to love each other so that we might be one with his Father, set him on a collision course with all the principalities and powers of this world that are invested in keeping us blind, broken and separate.

It was Thomas, among all the disciples, who said, as Jesus turned towards Jerusalem for the last time "Let us also go with him, so that we may die with him!" Yes, Thomas understood that Jesus' ministry of revealing God's love was risky business—life and death business. He understood that the God Jesus revealed was a God of costly love. Jesus revealed God to Thomas by spending his time among the most wounded of the world—the poor, the outcast, the sinners. And that it would ultimately cost him his life. The God Jesus reveal to Thomas was a God who was touched and wounded by the world.

So in order for Thomas to believe that the other disciples had really seen Jesus, he needed to know that the person they had seen showed evidence of having really lived among the wounded, and having really died. He needed to see Jesus' wounds. To imagine a Jesus without wounds was an affront. A Jesus who had not been marked by suffering—who could that person possibly be? A God who did not retain the marks of having been with us, of having come close to the darkness of the world—that, to Thomas, would be blasphemy. An un-marked God was not one in whom Thomas could believe.

And so Thomas demands to see the wounded Jesus. He demands to see that Jesus' resurrection has *overcome* suffering and death, not been indifferent to it. He wants to know that woundedness transformed is nevertheless wounded. He wants to know that the Jesus he followed, and the God Jesus revealed was real.

And when Jesus does show Thomas his wounds, Thomas's response is instantaneous. "My Lord, and my God!" Thomas falls at Jesus' wounded feet with the fullest confession of faith in the entire Gospel of John. This raised-yet-still-wounded Jesus standing before Thomas has his absolute faith, devotion and commitment. Thomas recognized God in Jesus' wounds.

The others, seeing Jesus' wounds recognize their teacher. But they do not confess him God. It is only Thomas who fully understands what he has seen. And I think Thomas understands something else as well. Thomas, before any of the others, understands what Jesus means when he says "As the Father sent me, so I send you." In his confession of faith, Thomas gives his life to the risen Christ, and to imitating the life that Jesus led. The others welcome the return of their teacher. Thomas commits his life to God.

And tradition tells us that Thomas left that upper room to carry the gospel to India, and eventually to give his life serving his risen, wounded Lord. The other disciples did too, of course. Very soon they, too, got what Thomas knew the moment he saw Jesus' wounds. Today's reading from Acts shows us Peter and other disciples persecuted and imprisoned for teaching in the name of Jesus. They, too, will give their lives to continuing Jesus' work of costly love.

And so must we. It is Thomas' confession that makes a place for us in the story. Jesus confirms that Thomas has got it right. You believe because you have seen me. You see my wounds and you recognize God. Jesus then turns from Thomas and the other disciples and looks out at us. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.

And what is it that we are to come to believe? That Christ is risen? Yes. But more, I think. That the risen Christ is the wounded Jesus. That Jesus' wounds are God's wounds. Because Jesus is risen, wounds and all, we are enabled to believe that God is present in the wounded places of the world. We are emboldened to proclaim life in the face of death, healing in the presence of brokenness, resurrection in the midst of suffering.

Like Thomas, I believe because the risen Christ still bears the wounds of the incarnation. It is important to me that the Jesus who rose from the dead is not untouched by his human suffering. He still bears the wounds he earned by coming close to the woman at the well in Samaria—the woman who had to draw water in the middle of the day because her neighbors shunned her. And so he also bears the wounds of the high school girl in Massachusetts who felt so bullied and shunned that she took her own life. Jesus bears her suffering in his new life.

It is important that the one who raised Lazarus from the dead knows what it is to have been sealed in a tomb. And so he has also been buried under the mud in Rio, in a coal mine in West Virginia, in the rubble in Haiti. Jesus bears their deaths in his new life.

It is important that the one who restored sight to the blind man was pierced in the process. Because he is still pierced by human blindness. He is still present in the blindness of human conflict—in the escalating violence in Iraq, in the ongoing struggle in the Holy Land, in the

divisive partisan politics that hamstring our own nation. Coming close to the blind, and restoring sight is painful business. It still pierces God's heart. Jesus bears our blindness in his new life.

This is the risen life in which Thomas the Faithful believes. The God of our salvation is a God of costly love. Thomas simply demands evidence that the one to whom he is asked to give his allegiance is the same one who came to share the pain and brokenness of the world. In saying "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", Thomas is showing his faith in the God of suffering love, and his refusal to bow down before any counterfeit. Thomas is teaching us to say what I believe we all must say: Show me that the God you serve is not blind to injustice, unmoved by hunger and homelessness, indifferent to suffering. Show me that the God you believe you have seen is present and responsive to human pain and need.

The one who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end is, and always has been, a God who is touched and wounded by our brokenness and wounding of each other. Christ will continue to carry in his body the marks of bleeding and dying and will continue to send us out to share in his costly self-giving love until he comes again with the clouds.

Until then, may we have the grace, with Thomas the Faithful, to demand to see his wounds, and to confess him our Lord and our God. Amen.