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Discernment

Texts: St. John 20:19-31; Acts 4:32-35

Poor Thomas! Just as the other disciples had, he, too, followed Jesus throughout his ministry. He, too, slept on the hard ground; he, too, had experienced all the ups and the downs of the last three years. At one important time he was even more courageous than the rest of them. When Jesus walked into certain confrontation with the authorities, Thomas was the one who had said, "Let us go also, that we may die with him." After Jesus' resurrection, he is also said to have taken the gospel further than anyone else as it is told of him that he went as far as India. The Indian church that traces its roots to apostolic times, the MarThoma church, to this day bears his name. Yet, despite all this, when he is remembered he is remembered by the unfortunate nickname of "Doubting Thomas" just because he missed one meeting of the disciples when Jesus appeared to all of them. They saw the risen Lord, he hadn't, and so he said he wouldn't believe until he, too, had seen Jesus, and had even put his fingers in his wounds. There are some nicknames that are bearable; being called "Doubting Thomas" is not one of them if you are an apostle who exhorts others to have faith. No apostle wants to have that on his resumé.

Over the years, Thomas as a result of this one incident has constantly been pointed to as the prime example of the stubbornly incredulous person who always demands proof, and who questions everything. He is the one who, unlike the others, won't believe until pushed into it; he needs to see and prove it for himself. A result of being like that would seem to be that in the hierarchy of faith, his faith is a second best sort of faith. This is even something that Jesus himself seems to underline when he says to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen

me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” This seems to imply that later generations who didn’t get to see, but believed simply on the testimony of those who had, were somehow Thomas’s spiritual superiors.

Yet, that is not quite what Jesus says, or implies. Nor is Thomas to be singled out for smirking and condescending treatment in this way. In a way, he as an individual stands for the whole group of the disciples who at the time of Jesus’ death and resurrection are not a particularly impressive lot of fellows. As a whole, they had deserted Jesus, Peter had denied him, Judas had betrayed him, and even at the time that they began to encounter the facts of the resurrection they were not so much overjoyed, as they were shocked, confused and frightened. Mark in his Gospel tells us that when the disciples discovered the empty tomb that they fled and told no one anything because they were afraid. John for his part and only slightly more positively tells us that when the first two disciples peered into the empty tomb that they as yet did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.

But here is the good news. If Thomas is a sort of symbolic stand in for some of the disciples’ failures, he is also a stand in for their greatest success. For Jesus doesn’t really imply that Thomas’ faith is second rate. He doesn’t actually say that those who believe later without seeing and therefore on testimony are blessed, but Thomas is not. He simply says that Thomas, just like the other disciples actually, believed because he saw. That, given everything else Jesus says, would actually imply blessedness, because faith is always blessed. After all, there were a whole lot of people, many of whom had been yelling “crucify him” who saw and didn’t believe. All Jesus says is that those who in the future would believe without seeing, have no less faith, and are no less blessed. In a sense, neither Thomas nor any future believer has actually missed anything; in faith they have caught exactly what they should have caught.

The fact of the matter is that both those who saw Jesus before and after his resurrection, like the disciples, and those who haven't, like every generation after the disciples, but who have faith have seen and discerned exactly the same thing. What they have discerned is something that can't be seen with the eyes in any case. Consider Thomas. What did he see? That Jesus was alive, and that it was the same Jesus whom he had followed all those years. The nail marks proved that. But what did he confess? "My Lord and my God!" That confession doesn't come from seeing with the eyes. That confession is a matter of believing what cannot be seen or touched. A man once dead and now alive is awe inspiring and more than a little frightening, but seeing a risen man by itself doesn't add up to seeing in that risen one the Lord and our God. That confession is thus a matter of seeing what cannot be seen except by faith. In that regard, Thomas, and all the rest of the disciples are just like us, and we are just like them, because we all have to see what cannot be seen other than by faith. We all have to discern what is going on, and we all have to see what can't be seen.

Faith is sometimes accused of simply being credulity, of failing to accept what is in front of us, and believing what is nowhere to be seen, of being blind belief. But real faith is quite the opposite. It discerns and sees and hears what human eyes and ears normally cannot. That is because God's grace never makes us less than what God created us to be; it always fulfills everything God means for us to be.

The German mystic of the twentieth century, Adrienne von Speyr, said of faith: "The eyes and ears of faith are made so keen by God that they see and hear *everything*. They are no longer bound to human limits and possibilities. The grace of God has stretched them into the infinite. Human seeing and hearing are in themselves limited: light can become too bright for the eye, sound too loud for the ear. But as soon as faith becomes real faith, as soon as the Son is

truly accepted, all human limitations fall away.”

Indeed. Faith, real faith can see all sorts of things that ungraced eyes cannot. For example, it can see in the person of the afflicted a human being who ought to have our love and respect, and can see real human beings even in the disgusting, the creepy, and in the prisoner. It can see that love and forgiveness needs to be given to the enemy. It can see possibility where no possibility otherwise seems to exist. For instance, it can see, as *The Letter to the Hebrews* puts it, as Moses did, a people in the slaves of Egypt, a real people with a future of world significance. It can see life and love even through death. It can do this because above all, it can see and hear where God acts and where God calls. As von Speyr adds, “[real faith] consists in seeing the face of God and hearing God’s voice through all earthy and human reality, through the incarnate Lord, through the saints, the neighbor through the world itself. The grace God gives in faith is a grace that meets and recognizes the grace of God everywhere.”

Now, there are wonderful examples throughout history of faith that sees what ungraced eyes do not see. They include people such as Thomas himself, whose faith and whose call did send him all the way to India. They include martyrs, past and present, who refused empire and the fear of empire and who used their lives to point human hearts to something higher. They include men and women of great compassion, such as Albert Schweitzer, who left fame and secure academia to found the Lambarene Hospital in Africa, Dorothy Day who founded the Hospitality Houses of the Catholic Worker movement in New York City, and Jean Vanier who has founded the communities of L’Arche, an international organization which creates communities where people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them can share life together.

But let me add that the faith that sees what otherwise cannot be seen is not just present in

exceptional individuals. It can also be present in people who think of themselves as ordinary, and it can even be present in communities. Indeed, a discerning community of faith is just what the church is – or at least what it ought to be. It is not just a loose collection of faithful individuals, it is the body of Christ, a community that discerns its risen head, the Lord Jesus Christ, and that also discerns the Lord's call to continue and carry out his mission to the world.

This above all is what I think the book of *The Acts of the Apostles* is trying to say when it portrays the early church in Jerusalem as being “of one heart and soul,” with none claiming private ownership of anything, with all things held in common, and where “there was not a needy person among them.” Perhaps the picture is idealized; undoubtedly, it is idealized. Clearly the communal experiment came to end at some point. But what is most striking about the picture, even with those considerations, is that it portrayed a community that saw itself as *different*. As it presented itself to the world of the Roman Empire, it did not borrow from the images of empire or kingship or national pride around it to present itself. It did not try to improve on the status quo or to attract people on the basis of their present modes of living. Nor did it even try to grasp at future ways of governing, such as ours where it is thought some kind of common good might be reached by playing the enlightened self interest of all people off against each other. No, this was a community that saw something other than the commonplace realities most people think they have to bow down to as real. This was a community that saw that it could live in a different way, even though nobody else had ever lived that way, even though others thought it was crazy to live that way. This was a community that saw itself as *called* to live that way, including making sure that there was nobody needy among them. It saw what human eyes cannot see except by grace, namely, that people really can live that way.

Faith, real faith, lets us see what cannot otherwise be seen. It lets us live in a way that

others perhaps never thought to live. Faith calls us individually to see and hear this way, but it also calls the church and all the faithful who compose it, to discern again and again who its Lord is, and to discern what its Lord is calling it to do.

Talking about discerning the Lord and the Lord's call is no commonplace, no abstract principle, no cliché, for the church. Any church that doesn't see beyond the ordinary is not doing what it should. Every church needs to discern the extraordinary for the sake of the world, for the world is continually working against real excellence in the human spirit. The church therefore needs to see and to live differently so that humans can excel in their spirits.

That is no less true for this church if it is to have a real mission in this community. This challenge to see who its Lord is, and what he is calling us to do is especially no commonplace for this church now. We are in the midst of a process of discerning what God is calling us to do over the next several years in Rye, a process that belongs to the church as the church; it is more than an intermediary step to hiring a new senior pastor. It is a process that belongs to our very identity, and as such it is a process that every member of this congregation is invited to and urged to participate in. That discernment is not a matter of asking for consulting advice on what members think somebody else should do, nor is it a matter of taking a satisfaction survey. Rather, it is a matter above all of asking us all, together, to see what isn't plainly in front of us. It is a matter of asking us to discern God's will, and to put aside our own wills. It is a matter of asking us to be faithful. May we be found to be so.