



JESUIT
INSTITUTE
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Homily 2nd Sunday of Easter – Year B

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“Dude, what have you been smoking? Give me some!”

That, I suspect, is what many folks would say to me if I told them that I’d had a vision of the Risen Christ. And I would probably either say the same or at very least think it if someone told me this. So I suppose that the response of Thomas in today’s gospel does not surprise me.

If you think my remarks are somewhat disedifying or lacking the piety or gravitas of this occasion, I suggest you deal with it. The Gospel writers had to deal with Thomas’ doubt. Following a noble and ancient way of studying Scripture, if it’s scandalous and yet the author recounts it, the story is almost certainly true!

Thomas is probably my favourite apostle. Him – and Mary Magdalene. (I’ll talk about her another time, perhaps). I like him because he’s so real. He’s direct. He says what others dare not say, what I suspect many Christians dare not say.

Researchers into the paranormal tell us that frequently after a death of a loved one, some people often experience ‘ghosts’. They see their dead loved ones, once or twice – and in some cases quite frequently – after the funeral. Usually, after a while, these ‘appearances’ stop. Psychologists explain this away as a phenomenon accompanying the grieving process. It’s all in the mind.

I agree with the psychologists, despite having had a few weird experiences myself. Of course, I also share the view expressed by Professor Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*: “Of course it’s in your mind, Harry. Doesn’t make it any less real.”

So, it seems to make sense that anyone who was not there when the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples might be a tad sceptical, like our friend Thomas. Were he a 21st Century person, Thomas would have probably responded in a manner of a psychologist, professional or amateur:

“You imagined it. It was a projection of your sense of loss. Perhaps even, gentleman (not the ladies present!), a certain amount of guilt based on the fact that you – that we – ran away and hid when the System murdered our beloved leader.”

Indeed.

As I imagine the scene, such frankness points as much to Thomas’ own state of mind after the Crucifixion. After all, was he not the one who said, “Let’s go to Jerusalem and die with you!” a few days before? Thomas’ sense of loss is combined with deep guilt perhaps – in psychological terms, survivor’s guilt – at not being there for Jesus during his Passion. Perhaps this extends to his deep desire to forget he was ever part of the adventure.

But the joke is on him. The Risen Christ appears to him and ends forever, Thomas' possible ducking out of the disciples' mission. Our gospel tells us that Jesus confronts him – kindly but firmly. And not just appearing but calling on him to touch his wounds, to confirm that Thomas – and the others – are not suffering from some kind of trauma-induced paranormal delusion.

The text is a bit ambiguous – we are not told that Thomas takes Jesus up on his offer. But we do see Thomas' response: "My Lord and my God!" The sceptic is converted, his doubts are ended. And in this, Thomas becomes the patron saint of sceptical believers everywhere!

And not just the patron saint of sceptics. Ancient traditions tell us that Thomas went forth as an apostle proclaiming the Risen Christ, reaching many claim, India. Can we prove this conclusively? No. But what we do know is that when Europeans reached India for the first time, they found communities of Christians who traced their origins back to an apostle named Thomas.

What can we learn from all this?

I think here I can speak only for myself. For the most part, I have lived – happily, I must insist – in a world governed by reason. My first instinct is to question, to doubt. Before I accept anything, I look for evidence. I look for logic. I also explore alternative reasons and causes for things. Even in my prayer, I find myself more asking God questions than getting answers. And even when I've had profound experiences of connection to God, my instinct afterwards is to ask: Is this all in my head? And then: Does it make it any less true?

I don't think I am alone in this.

The example of Thomas confronts us and consoles us. Thomas confronts us with the challenge of living with questions, even doubts, while remaining disciples of Christ. At no point did Thomas cease to be a disciple. In some ways, for the sake of who Christ was to him, in fidelity to the memory of the man who had captured his imagination and inspired him to follow, Thomas courageously challenges his fellow disciples to not give in to what he thinks is delusional - to not seek the false consolation of easy answers.

And, yes, Thomas consoles us. He consoles us when – confronted by the truth of resurrection – he embraces Christ's mission more fully. Having resolved his questions, having renewed his faith in Christ, he goes out to proclaim Christ to the whole world.

May we, even amidst fear and uncertainty, have the strength to do the same! May the Resurrection move us from doubt to faith, from faith to action.