

“Learning from Thomas? No doubt!”, Easter 3 (B) – April 15, 2018

Tim Hall

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

Last week, Father Ralph preached on today’s reading from Acts. In his powerful Sermon, Ralph spoke first of Peter’s (and the Apostles’) powerful testimony and witness of the risen Christ. Of how their brave, unwavering proclamations, sharing the Good News so that all might believe, was not appreciated by many in power, resulting in their martyred deaths.

He spoke of this month of April being a good time to remember some of our modern day martyrs. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed in a Nazi concentration camp on April 9, 1945 for speaking out against Hitler and his despotic regime. Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated on April 4, 1968, who preached non-violence, love and justice to a broken society. And Bobby Kennedy, who tirelessly worked for racial and economic justice and gave inspirational speeches following King’s assassination, himself shot down two months later.

All these, and countless throngs from the Apostles to our day, have stood up in the face of injustice and intolerance to proclaim truth to power and the hope we have for peace in a world where Jesus Christ is accepted as our Lord and our God.

So, since Ralph didn’t preach on our Gospel reading last week, I thought I’d touch on another martyr for the faith this morning: St. Thomas.

Thomas is known in popular culture as "Doubting Thomas" because of the famous Bible story we heard last Sunday, in which he demands to see physical proof of Jesus’ resurrection before believing it, and Jesus appears, inviting Thomas to touch the scars of his wounds from the crucifixion.

Thomas, whose full name was Didymus Judas Thomas, lived in Galilee when it was part of the ancient Roman Empire and was called to be one of Jesus’ followers. His inquisitive mind led him to naturally doubt God's work in the world, but also led him to pursue answers to his questions, which ultimately led him to great faith.

Recall, Thomas wasn't with the rest of the followers when Jesus first appeared to them following his resurrection. Remember Thomas' reaction when the disciples excitedly tell him the news: " 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.'"

Shortly afterward, the resurrected Jesus appears to the followers again and after greeting them immediately turns to Thomas and invites him to examine his crucifixion scars in exactly the way Thomas had requested. John’s Gospel records: "A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood

among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.'"

After getting the physical proof he'd wanted of the resurrection miracle, Thomas's doubt turned to strong belief: Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (John 20:28).

The next verse reveals that Jesus blesses people who are willing to have faith in something that they can't see right now: "Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'" (John 20:29).

Thomas' encounter with Jesus shows how the right response to doubt -- curiosity and searching -- can lead to deep belief.

When Thomas believed, he could be quite courageous. Earlier in John's Gospel chapter 11 that when the disciples were worried about accompanying Jesus to Judea (because the Jews had previously tried to stone Jesus there), Thomas encouraged them to stick with Jesus, who wanted to return to the area to help his friend, Lazarus, even if that meant being attacked by Jewish leaders there. But Thomas says: "Let us also go, that we might die with him."

Thomas later asked Jesus a famous question when the disciples were eating the Last Supper with him.

Jesus is telling his disciples: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas' question comes next, revealing that he's thinking of physical directions rather than spiritual guidance: "Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Thanks to Thomas' question, Jesus clarified his point, uttering these famous words about his divinity: "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'"

After Jesus ascended into heaven, Thomas and the other disciples traveled to various parts of the world to share the Gospel message with people. Thomas shared the Gospel with people in Syria, ancient Persia, and India. Thomas is still known today as the apostle to India for the many churches that he formed and helped build there.

Several years ago I was on a business trip to India to provide P-8 aircraft training to the Indian Navy at their Naval Base on the southeastern coast, just north of Sri Lanka and overlooking the Bay of Bengal. Well, to my great surprise I stumbled upon the living history of the story of St. Thomas in India, something about which I knew absolutely nothing previously. It moved me

greatly and provided another reinforcement point to my faith. I'd like to share with you a short memoir I wrote during my visit there:

I'm in Chennai India this week, on business, and I just returned from a Sunday church service at San Thome Basilica. The church is a minor Catholic basilica erected over the tomb of St. Thomas the Apostle, who arrived in Chennai in 52 AD bringing the Good News of Christ. There are several miracles attributed to him and he was martyred here in 72 AD, being stabbed with a lance. Hence, he is always depicted as holding a spear. The service was in English. They have 7 services on Sundays, alternating between English and Tamil, and 4 services on weekdays. I could barely understand a word, with fans whirring, a fuzzy sound system, and thick accents, but it was still an amazing thing to be worshiping with fellow Christians in such a different place. And so many are dressed, especially the women, as I imagine women were dressed in ancient Palestine. The poverty here is overwhelming... perhaps not so much so in those that were in the church (although I'm sure many are struggling far more than we can even imagine), but certainly just outside its gates. And only a block to the east is the beach on the Bay of Bengal where yesterday I saw the most heartrending (and frightening) squalor I have ever witnessed. It is so hard to describe. How do we as Christians deal with it, when there seems so little we can do? His Kingdom come! That was my prayer in San Thome this morning. I will leave this city in a little less than a week, returning to a place that is half a world away geographically and worlds away economically. But all I witnessed here will still be with us throughout the world... in Liberia, Guatemala, Appalachia, the embattled Coptic churches I saw in Egypt, and now Chennai. Surely there is still so very much work to be done to further the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. I pray that God will give us all the strength and the faith to carry on in the work He has given us to do.

That's what I wrote that Sunday morning. And that's what I still believe. It's just amazing to see God's work, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, at work throughout the world. So many different people worshiping in so many different ways. I've been lucky enough to share worship with Christian congregations in many different lands... in Taiwan, Liberia, Singapore, South Korea, Pine Ridge Reservation, post-Katrina Biloxi. Just last night, at the Carver Center, I witnessed an Evangelical Hispanic congregation, fervently worshipping, and although I couldn't understand much besides "Dios" and "Alleluia", I could tell that lives were being given to the Lord. Even in the face of disaster, poverty, injustice, God's message of hope to the whole wide world is powerful and life changing. It brings to mind for me, words of one of our old hymn:

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise.

The glories of my God and King. The triumphs of His grace

My gracious Master and my God assist me to proclaim.

To spread through all the earth abroad the honors of Thy name

Amen