

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on the Second Sunday of Easter, 1 May 2011.

Three images have occupied my heart and mind this past week. The first was the glory of our time together last week--the whole of it--and its culmination on Sunday. The second is the devastation from the tornadoes, helplessness and destruction. The third is the joy and all the people smiling as they poured forth from Westminster Abbey, and as the people of the UK, waved to William and Kate as they made their way back to the palace. You may have other images. Whatever they are--whether they're like mine or something altogether different--hold onto them as we look at this gospel text.

It was Easter evening. After the public execution of Jesus, his closest friends and followers did the prudent thing: went into hiding.

Someone found a safe house in Jerusalem, a room big enough for all of them, a stout door with a strong bolt. There they were, lying low, trying to be inconspicuous, waiting for the furor surrounding the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus to settle, afraid that if they were seen the same thing would happen to them.

Earlier that day, before dawn, Mary claimed to have seen Jesus and talked to him. The ones in the room dismissed it. And then, that evening, something happened that none of them would ever forget, something that made all the difference in the world, something that challenged everything they thought they knew about life and death. Suddenly Jesus was there. Was it an apparition? Did they imagine it? And what he said was "Peace be with you." He said it a second time so they wouldn't miss the point: "Peace be with you." And then he told them why he was there, why they were given this Easter experience: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

His point is to get them out of that room, to give them enough peace, enough of his spirit—his life and breath—to get them up and moving again. The point here—the point of Easter—is to get us who might be frightened or discouraged in the wake of the destruction in the south, or concerned about our own futures, or our own children, to get us up and moving toward the streets of the city, toward our homes and families and communities—toward life.

Except that one of the apostles was missing, Thomas. When he returns, from wherever he was (the late Peter Gomes once said Thomas was out grocery shopping), Thomas says, "Unless I see it too—see the evidence, see the nail holes in his hands—I'm not believing it. No way." He reminds us that doubt is a normal, natural part of real faith. Thank God for Thomas.

Wendell Berry argues that we need more doubt, not less; more questions, more skepticism in the public arena, particularly the political arena. And on this topic I love what the poet Rilke wrote: "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and learn to love the questions themselves" (see William Sloane Coffin, *The Courage to Love*, p. 7).

Jesus wanted his friends to get up and move out of that room, to stop crouching behind the bolted doors. He wants us to do likewise. Those of us who have not heard or who find it hard to believe that death is not the end...he wants us to get up and walk out of that fearful place. How can we tell that to the people whose homes and towns have been destroyed? Or the ones whose loved ones have died? There are no more doors left for them, literally. They stand in the open. Can you picture Jesus standing there with them, hearing him say “touch my hands and my side. I’m here with you!”?

The Gospel continues. It was one week later, today, low Sunday. They’re still hanging out in that room, but this time Thomas is there.

Jesus comes again. “Peace be with you,” he says, and then to Thomas, “Put your finger here—see my hands. Reach out your hand.” And the most amazing thing: after all that, Thomas doesn’t do it, doesn’t touch the evidence his doubts demanded. Instead, a confession of faith and trust: “My Lord and my God.” So Thomas and the others got up, headed toward the door, walked into the future and changed the world.

As you behold various images from this past week, or from the whole of your life, I leave you with another image, this one from a priest and preacher called Barbara Brown Taylor. In her recent book entitled *Leaving Church* she says, “the parts of the Christian story that had drawn me into the Church were not the believing parts but the beholding parts:

Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy;  
Behold, the Lamb of God;  
Behold, I stand at the door and knock

She continues, “Christian faith seemed to depend on beholding things that were clearly beyond belief. . . . I wanted out of the belief business and back into the beholding business.”

We behold Jesus in his resurrection, coming to bring life to those who despair. We behold Jesus in his embrace of these children about to be baptized. We behold him saying “Peace be with you” to the people affected by the tornadoes, to the people of Libya, of Honduras, of suburban Boston, and of the United Kingdom.

And we behold Thomas, who doubts. The two of them, along with the women who first encountered Jesus, lead us out the door and into the world.