

Faithful Disciples – Niquita Hohm

Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

By the time Sunday rolled around, Thomas may have had a very long weekend. Friday night crying with friends, crying alone, running out of tears to cry; left with eyes stinging, but a brain unable to process the sights those stinging eyes took in. Saturday retracing steps, replaying the conversations, trying to reassure himself that his experience was real. By Sunday the denial and anger and despair may have been too heavy a weight to even get out of bed.

“While we often imagine that Thomas was out getting bagels or returning a library book or something routine, the possibility is that he was no longer gathering with the other disciples. It could be that Thomas’ faith was so completely shattered by the events of Friday that he no longer was living as a disciple.” We of course don’t know what kept Thomas away the week prior to his own encounter with the risen Lord, but the commentator who imagines this scenario goes on to unpack it: “That would suggest that the disciples’ manner of reconciliation was not simply, ‘Believe like us and you can be part of us.’ It would be more in the form of ‘This is what we believe and you are welcomed here however you believe.’ To that extent, the disciples’ task is not to convince others to believe, and certainly not to coerce some signal of faith, but to joyfully embrace their faith while making community with others. The point is not to convince Thomas, but to maintain the integrity of their experience and belief while inviting him to be part of them.”

I think more and more people are letting Thomas come to life in a thicker way, thankfully. But still, there are places where the unfortunate label remains firmly attached, as if Doubting is part of his name, as if the others were not in their own spaces of doubt before seeing Jesus for themselves.

We know doubting is not reserved for Thomas; Mary doesn’t believe until she’s called by name, and the rest of the Eleven are hiding behind locked doors and don’t believe until Jesus comes and reveals his resurrected but still wounded body to them. This is one of the weirdest and messiest things, and yet such a hopeful and beautiful thing about our faith, that the resurrected Lord still wears the scars. The resurrected body is not a simulated or ethereal one. It is a uniquely transformed body, one that can reach the disciples who’ve locked themselves in, and one that has decisively defeated death, but still Jesus’ real body, of flesh and blood and breath.

Jesus’ benediction is not rebuke of Thomas so much as inclusion of us all in the God story. This gospel’s initial hearers, and we ourselves, may wonder how we hold onto faith without sight. We’re still in the Easter season, but perhaps we already wonder if the miracle of the resurrection will hold, as we slip further away from the empty tomb and into ordinary time?

Thomas’ story also brings to mind one of my favorite confessions in all of scripture, *I believe, help my unbelief*.

And Jesus responds, by offering up himself. As one commentator notes: “Touching, being touched by, someone we’re close to changes us. It gives us strength, hope, spiritual courage. It makes us able to face trouble, to stand up to evil, to live bravely.

It gives us faith.”

Each week gathering as a community around Word and Table is a chance to climb into God’s story. And this week in particular we should see the doors flung wide open for us as Jesus includes us in his blessing. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* The breath and the life and the blessing pour out on all generations.

The same breath of life that first fills lungs and animates living beings. The same breath that sweeps all across the earth, with Ezekiel bearing witness to its animating power in the valley of dry bones, *Come from the four winds, o breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.* Now the One who they had, just a couple days earlier, witnessed breathing his last comes to breathe the breath of life on them once again. Hoping this gust will propel them back out across the four winds. Or at least far enough to get them out of the locked doors.

Thomas’ confession gets at the fact that we’re on a collision course with Empire. *My Lord and my God.* This is not only recognition and naming the companion he has grieved. This is a confession of allegiance that puts Thomas’ body on a certain trajectory back into the world once he leaves this room. It puts him on a similar trajectory with Peter and the other apostles who, in our Acts passage, confess, *We must obey God rather than any human authority.*

The apostles found themselves on this collision course with the religious and political elite when they put their bodies out in the streets to heal the afflicted, when they put their bodies on the line with and for those Jesus gave his body for.

Obedying God’s authority rather than any human authority also looks like creating a social justice club. It looks like examining our liturgical language to include those excluded. It looks like standing with victims of abuse for as long as justice takes, even in the face of opposition. It looks like praying for your enemies even as you stand up to them. It looks like living boldly and fearlessly.

When we do this bold and fearless living **together**, it makes a difference. Reading a few verses before our passage begins in Acts gives us an image of that. *Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, **but without violence**, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.*

I’m certainly not advocating for violence as the thing that does the persuading, but what would it look like for such large numbers of everyday folks to be so fiercely committed to saving lives and bringing about justice that the religious and civil authorities had to pay attention to the noise we made?

Mitzi Smith comments: “If it were not for the willingness of the people, the masses, to disrupt injustice, to protest, the apostles would have been the fatal victims of police brutality. When

injustice and oppression permeate religious, social, and political systems, nothing short of mass activism will transform them.”

The persecuted communities initially addressed in Revelation also received this proclamation about Jesus, *the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth*. This call, to follow the One who loves us and freed us, serves both those ancient communities and our own not just as an anesthetic for the hurt, but also the discipline for an alternate Way.

Praying *to him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever, Amen*, is not a low stakes prayer in any sort of context where mortals seek to maintain their own dominion. When those earthly thrones seem untouchable, start smaller and lean into the communal voice being raised up.

Where on the collision course with Empire do we find ourselves? Specifically, in each of our uniquely scarred, thick, real lives right in front of us right now?

What is our trajectory in between Sundays? Where does our vision of the scars and our confession of allegiance to God lead us to go? Do we let the wind of Jesus’ breath propel us out of the locked doors?

May we go forth as touched and breathed on people...