

“In Thomas’ Footsteps: Finding Peace and Purpose Through Radical Honesty” by Erica Lloyd



*Icon of the Resurrection by
the hand of Thomas Xenakis*

April 19, 2020

Second Sunday of Easter

In college and for a few years after, I attended a huge Presbyterian church that was wrong for me in all sorts of ways, but there was a gifted pastor who preached these wonderful, often alliterative three-point sermons that I loved. So, inspired by Greg Thompson, here's my three-point sermon on our gospel reading today:

- The presence of peace
- Telling the truth
- Failure as formation

Let's pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN

The Presence of Peace

It's hard to miss: Jesus says "Peace be with you" to his shell-shocked disciples three times in a passage of just ten verses. It's a phrase that has become a traditional greeting among Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. But with Jesus' repetition of the phrase, it seems he means more than just, "Hey guys!"

And that's quite reasonable, given the circumstances. The scared and heartbroken disciples are hidden behind a locked door and their dead leader just... appears. This is unsettling on many levels. But always one to read his audience, Jesus gets that. And so, he gently repeats the greeting: Peace be with you. Peace be with you. Peace be with you.

What occurred to me as I reflected on these words is that it seems like PEACE is the actor in this phrase; the "you" is just... there. It's possible that I'm reading into the English something that isn't there in Jesus's actual words, but I found myself glad that Jesus' greeting doesn't read as a command to his disciples to "be at peace." Because, honestly, I can think of a lot of things I could have felt if I were a disciple in that locked room, and "at peace" would probably not have been one of them. But instead of a command to some inner state of calm, I hear in Jesus' words a promise: I am sending *peace* to be *with* you.

Maybe I've been at home alone in my apartment too much – scratch that, I've DEFINITELY been home alone in my apartment

too much – but I’ve found it helpful over the past few months think of peace as a kind of presence that Jesus has sent to be with me: to watch over me, to keep me company, to sit beside me and occasionally reach out to pat my hand in a reassuring, grandmotherly kind of way. I may not have been feeling peace *within* me at a given moment, but I found imagining peace *with* me was a profound comfort in its own way.

I’ve found that thinking of peace as a companion that God has given me started to have an interesting impact. I know you’ll never have seen this coming, but thinking about peace NOT as “the way I should be” (which, given the circumstances is going to be very hard work), but instead as a friend that’s just here for me, actually made it more possible for me to experience peace.

What if we can weather this current storm with Peace, not as a some inner calm that we have to manufacture, but as a quarantine buddy who’s just... here with us, happy to share her gifts? Ready to hang out whenever we are done with obsessing over the latest numbers and new stories?

At the end of the Maundy Thursday service, I was struck by the final prayer that said:

*The peace of God embraces us,
holding us together as one small part
of the Body of Christ.*

Peace being with us doesn’t mean we aren’t falling apart. Peace means that despite our falling apart, Jesus is here in that hidden room with us, picking up all the broken bits. Peace can be with us even as we’re honest about reality. And that brings me to the second point:

Telling the Truth

When I think of what it must have been like to be a disciple

of Jesus, I imagine how, after following him for a while, I might have started to believe anything could happen. As I watched him turn water into wine, heal the sick, feed the crowds, and still the storms, I would have started to hope that the world could truly be different – that swords would be beat into plowshares, that there would be no more death, that love could reign. And as I followed Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, how I would have thought: this is it. This is the moment everything is going to change.

So I get Thomas. I get the heartbreak and disillusionment. Because sometimes after you see your hope crushed – crucified – you know it's better not to hope at all.

So Thomas, upon hearing the news that his friends have seen Jesus, somehow alive, rejects the opportunity for hope in favor of self-preservation. He draws his line in the sand: I'll believe it when I see it.

How often are we that honest about our unbelief? You know, I think one of the most profound things about Seekers' worship service is the time for open confession. It is incredibly hard, and yet incredibly powerful, to say out loud: I do not believe that the love of God is powerful enough to fix *this*.

But Thomas looks them in the eye and says it! He says: Look guys, unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my hand into his side, I will *never* believe.

Now, surely the resurrected Jesus would have been well within his rights to say, *Oh really, Thomas? After all you've seen, you think I'd be conquered by death? You saw me raise Lazarus from the dead but don't believe I could raise myself? Fine. Think what you're gonna think.*

But that's not who Jesus is. Instead, Jesus shows up and does the most Jesus-like thing he possibly could: he humbly submits to Thomas's demand. He says in effect, *I see this boundary you've drawn from your hurt and your pain. I will not punish*

you for it. I'm here to love you so that you can cross it.

And Thomas does, in a heartbeat. It's not even clear that he DOES touch Jesus' wounds – the invitation alone is enough. "My savior and my God!" he says. And this, to me, makes Thomas a role model. You know, Thomas catches a lot of flack; we've made his name synonymous with being a nay-sayer. But in this moment, Thomas shows us what real belief looks like; he sees the truth and accepts it with his whole, broken heart. He has no interest in clinging to his old notions, makes no attempt at trying to explain himself. Just: awe at work of God. How can we do any better than that?

And that moment would have never happened if Thomas had just nodded at the news of Jesus' resurrection and said, "Cool, guys, I hope you told Jesus I said hi." This moment only happens because Thomas is brave enough to speak his truth. Without radical honesty, transformation can't happen. And that brings me to my last point:

Failure as Formation

What Jesus says to Thomas next used to disturb me. "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed, and *you* are not one of them." Okay, so Jesus doesn't actually say that last bit – but that's how I always read this verse: a reproach. *You know, a better disciple would have believed the news as soon as he heard it, Thomas.* This is Jesus naming the blessedness all of the true believers while giving Thomas the side eye.

But that doesn't even make sense! How can I look at Thomas in this moment and not call him Blessed based on the interaction he just had with Jesus?

Instead, Reverend Dr. Nicole Massie Martin suggests that Jesus's words, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" are not criticism, but commissioning: *Thomas, YOU will bless those who have not seen, who will never get the*

chance to touch my wounds. They will believe because of you. They will know me through your story.

Apparently, that's how Thomas heard it, too. According to tradition, Thomas eventually traveled all the way to southern India preaching the gospel to those who had definitively not seen: they had never met Jesus, his disciples, people he had healed – they had not even seen the mountains where he taught or the seas he walked upon.

And given the fact that there are about 28 million Christians in India today, many of whom trace their religious heritage back to Thomas himself, he did a pretty great job. And of course! Thomas was so obviously the right person to preach to those who must have been thinking, *if only I could see this Jesus, I might be able to believe*. Thomas knew that struggle, knew what it was like to get to the other side of it.

So Thomas' heartbreak and his doubt were not only healed by Jesus, they were transformed into his calling. We know this is not only true of Thomas, it's true for so many of us; it is BECAUSE of those painful bits of our history that we are equipped for the work Jesus calls us to. I think of John Morris and Donna Franklin and others at Seekers who are sponsors in AA. I think of Irving Moody, a former co-worker from my days at "I Have a Dream," who could tell our Dreamers about the importance of staying in school and out of trouble from the perspective of someone who looked back on his decision to drop out of school from behind the bars of a jail cell. I think of Tara Livesay, a friendly acquaintance from Haiti, whose public, honest reckoning with trauma has made her such a powerful advocate for the fact that the healing love of Jesus doesn't exempt us from the need for good mental health care.

Like Jesus, we give others life by bearing our scars: they show the wounded that healing is possible. Our old failures give hope to those who see that, failures notwithstanding, we

are no less a part of God's work.

After all, Doubting Thomas brought a sizeable part of a subcontinent to faith.

I give thanks for Jesus's power to heal and transform; I give thanks for Jesus' tenderness with our vulnerable honesty; I give thanks that Jesus sends peace to be with me.

May peace be with all of you. AMEN.