

What Jesus Didn't Do

Today's Gospel passage picks up just a few hours after Mary Magdalene told the disciples about her encounter with the resurrected Christ. You'll recall that, upon discovering that Jesus's body had vanished, Mary ran to tell John and Peter. They went to the tomb and, finding it empty, returned home, leaving Mary behind to meet her risen Lord alone. Jesus told her to give the disciples this message: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary delivered Jesus's message, but we don't know how the disciples took her news. Judging from her apparent absence in this passage and the locked doors at the house where they were staying, Mary's announcement doesn't seem to have lifted their hearts. Perhaps they were still too bound up in sorrow and fear to accept what she said. So, after giving them a little time to sit with Mary's words, Jesus appeared among them, locked doors being no obstacle for him, and breathed the Holy Spirit into them as a prelude to sending them out to convert the world. Sadly for Thomas, he wasn't with his friends when Jesus arrived. That meant Thomas had to wait a whole, long, frustrating week to see for himself that the Lord was risen indeed. We'll come back to Thomas in a minute but, first, let's consider what Jesus might have been up to during the intervening days.

We can safely presume that the resurrected Jesus had full access to his divine powers. Having overcome death and the grave, what else could possibly get in his way? And, having suffered mightily at their hands, who could object if Jesus decided to walk through some other locked doors to show Pilate, Herod, or the Sanhedrin how utterly they had failed in their attempts to silence him? Perhaps he did – John's Gospel doesn't tell us how Jesus spent the week between his first and second visit to the disciples. But none of the Gospels even hints that Jesus confronted his tormentors after his Resurrection. We're told that Jesus appeared to Mary

Magdalene, two followers on the road to Emmaus, the disciples, his brother James and, according to tradition, his grieving mother. Later, St. Paul tells us that Jesus appeared to him in a vision and to a group of over five hundred believers. He didn't show himself to the Sanhedrin, Herod or Pilate, however. Why not?

Bible scholars have put forth various theories. Perhaps Jesus knew that his enemies would be unmoved by his Resurrection. They might conclude that he never really died in the first place or, more ominously, that his life had been restored by demonic means. They might try to kill him again. His reappearance might also have rekindled the political firestorm that impelled his Crucifixion, leading to further bloodshed. Or perhaps he had another reason that may become apparent if we consider what else Jesus didn't do when he returned.

The disciples didn't exactly cover themselves in glory during Jesus's Passion. Judas was the worst of them, but the other disciples all ran away when Jesus was arrested, and Peter repeatedly denied knowing Jesus even after swearing that he would never repudiate him. One could hardly blame Jesus if he had taken the disciples to task for their disloyalty and cowardice when he walked through those locked doors. But he didn't utter so much as a single harsh word. Instead, he wished them peace and breathed the Holy Spirit into them so they could go out and preach the Gospel, just as if they had stood bravely beside him all along. And when Thomas insisted that he wouldn't believe Jesus had returned until he saw and touched Jesus's wounds himself, Jesus didn't absent himself or reproach Thomas for his skepticism. Instead, he reappeared and invited Thomas to touch him, saying "Do not doubt, but believe." When Thomas finally put his sorrow and skepticism aside to touch Jesus and exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" perhaps we can imagine Jesus shaking his head and smiling when he replied, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Jesus's kindness and patience may have persuaded Thomas to trust what he was seeing as much as the scars under his fingers did. Their conversation in this passage is just so Jesus. He didn't criticize Thomas for his doubts or poke at whatever hurt feelings drove Thomas to insist that his friends must be lying. He just gently redirected Thomas's attention from a heartbreaking false belief to the restorative truth that stood right in front of him. The Crucifixion had happened, it was horrifying, and everyone suffered, Jesus most of all. But then it was over, the outcome was infinitely better than anyone could have imagined, and no one was going to benefit from dwelling on how painful it had been and how awful they felt about the mistakes they made while it was happening. It was time to repent, learn the lessons, and move on, because everything had worked out according to God's plan and all was very well indeed.

No one alive today took part in Jesus's Passion, but almost everyone knows his story and we've all benefitted from his self-sacrifice. Unfortunately, institutional religion has too often used the debt we owe to our Savior as a stick to beat the faithful into relentless shame. Humankind is fallen, and all of us are flawed. That's why we need Jesus not only to redeem us from the sins of our ancestors, but to rescue us from our own sins and to heal the wounds they leave on our souls. We can't perfect ourselves by virtue of sheer willpower or self-punishment, and the sooner we get over the prideful idea that we can, the better. We need his help and, praise be to God, Jesus is happy to give it. That's where Thomas comes in.

Three years ago, Pope Francis preached a lovely sermon on this passage, pointing out that Jesus's merciful words to Thomas are a reminder that God doesn't require his children to have unshakable faith. Instead, Francis said, Jesus wants his followers "to seek him, to call on him, or even, like Thomas, to protest, bringing him our needs and our unbelief." Declaring that "the Lord is not looking for perfect Christians," Francis urged his listeners to recognize that our crises of

faith help us to recognize that we need God, enabling us to “return to the Lord, to touch his wounds, to experience his love anew as if it was the first time ... In this way, we will also become capable of compassion, of approaching the wounds of others without inflexibility and without prejudice.”

The Son of God had and has an unparalleled ability to guide his Father’s wayward children not by denying our shortcomings, but by refusing to dwell on them. He didn’t condemn his friends for their mistakes, which meant they couldn’t condemn themselves, either. And just as he came back for Thomas, he comes back for us when we need him. “Jesus does not give up, he does not get tired of us, he is not afraid of our crises, our weaknesses,” Francis said. “He always comes back ... Jesus is the Lord of ‘other chances’: He always gives another one, always.” The trick is not to close ourselves off when our own faith falters, “barricading ourselves in our problems and shutting Jesus out of the house.”

Francis was right that Thomas represents each of us, with our doubts, disappointments, and fears. It can be hard to have faith when life gets tough, and we can’t look Jesus in the face or touch his wounds the way Thomas did. But we can still tell him about our doubts and fears. We can listen for his quiet, loving replies. We can call to him, something that Herod, Pilate and the Sanhedrin never would. I suspect that Jesus didn’t appear to them after his Resurrection because they wouldn’t want to see him. Besides, Jesus was already looking ahead, preparing his disciples for the adventures to come. He didn’t waste a minute dwelling on past wrongs, which tells me that we shouldn’t, either. Instead, we can invite Jesus to walk through the locked doors in our own hearts and to show us how to repent of our own past mistakes, forgive the mistakes of others, and then let them go. And when we recognize Jesus’s loving touch as he loosens the grip of our shame and anger, we, like Thomas, can exclaim, “my Lord and my God!” Amen.