

Homily040316

WHERE WAS JESUS AFTER HIS RESURRECTION? AND WHERE WAS THOMAS?

Tomorrow our little band of pilgrims will leave from Saint Anthony's around 8 AM and then fly out of Newark Airport directly to Tel Aviv Airport in Israel. This will be my fifth pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Part of my delight is to assist those for whom this is a new experience to thoroughly enjoy it by setting up certain situations in a way that they can have their maximum impact on each person. I remember the first time I went there. I knew very little except what I had studied in the Seminary but there was one in our group who had been there before and he really helped and guided the other four of us. It is always desirable, as a general rule, to travel with someone who has been there before and someone who knows the way.

Remember the little dialogue between Jesus and Thomas during the Last Supper when Jesus says, "Where I am going you know the way." Thomas answers: "Lord we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?" Jesus says, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life." We are never told how Thomas handled that answer or how he processed the whole conversation. He, like Peter, had made a pledge to be willing to go up to Jerusalem and there die with Jesus. However, when it actually came to that moment Thomas took off like the others. Fear does that. The threat of death does that.

Today's gospel is the same every year. We call it the Gospel of Doubting Thomas. We know the scene. The apostles, minus Judas and Thomas, are hiding in the Upper Room where they had eaten the Last Supper with Jesus before his betrayal and trial and sudden execution. Turmoil. Dashed hopes. Confusion. Shame. What are they to make of all this? How are they to process all of this? And especially the news that the tomb is empty and his body is missing. Why isn't Thomas with the others? Where is he? We don't know. We can surmise. He is in shock, in great grief. His world is over. Sometimes in situations like that it is understandable if a person just wants to be alone, to sort things out.

Maybe he was with Mary trying to console her. But doesn't the Blessed Mother know? There is no record in the Scriptures of a meeting between Jesus and his mother post-Resurrection. That doesn't mean there wasn't one; it just means there is no record of one. I believe the Lord appeared to his mother, probably first of all. But whatever that was it just wasn't necessary for us to know it in order for us to be saved. Maybe Thomas was now holding the common purse and was on an errand to make provisions. We just don't know where Thomas was or why he wasn't with the others. All we know is that he was not with them. AND we know that Jesus does not appear to him by himself as Jesus does with Mary Magdalen.

So later when Thomas is told that the ten have seen Jesus, he is not ready to put aside his own knowledge. He saw him crucified and he watched him die, from a distance. Thomas knows when a person is dead, they are dead. He is going to need more proof than the words of this group no matter how long he has known them. My question is why Jesus doesn't go to Thomas individually and appear to him? The fact that Jesus didn't appear directly to Thomas means to me that there was a reason or a purpose here. Jesus wanted Thomas to be with the others when he showed himself again.

They are in the Upper Room again the following Sunday night. Remember, Sunday has no particular meaning for the Jew at this point in history. Friday night and Saturday are the Sabbath Day for rest and worship. Sunday is the first day of the week and actually for most a work day. But there they all are on that Sunday night when Jesus comes again. And Jesus knows about what Thomas said about putting his fingers into the nail marks because he mentions it and offers his hand. They obviously must still bear the nail print. It says that Thomas sees and now believes and he utters that most famous of belief statements: “My Lord and My God!”

Personally I think that we miss something that is actually pretty clear in this scene. When you gather with others who believe in Jesus and who love Jesus then it is that much easier for Jesus to show himself and that much easier for you to experience him as alive and present. It is the being with which sets the stage. It is the being with that is the condition for the possibility for us to encounter Jesus as real, as alive, as really present. When we gather with others who believe, something happens. Where two or three gather in my name, I am there in their midst, the Lord says. Something happens. We can encounter the living Christ. He becomes real for us.

I have a theory. I think that there are many Catholics, many who have gone to Catholic school even for 12 or 16 years. Catholics who have been raised in good homes where there is faith and love. Catholics who have been exposed to the richness of our faith heritage and who have been blessed to be surrounded by people who truly believe in Jesus. But what is missing from the lives of these Catholics is that they have never had a true authentic encounter with the living Christ. They have received their sacraments. They have even said their prayers but they have never really met the Lord. Jesus is not yet real for them. They have never really encountered him. And so they stop coming. There is no real reason to come because nothing really happens differently one way or another—goes their thinking. Their thinking is understandable but wrong.

And so, I have taken to praying for such people, in my family or in this parish, to have an encounter with Jesus. I pray that the Lord appear to them. I pray that they experience Christ as real, as alive, as caring about them. I have come to believe in the amazing mercy of Our Lord. I have experienced it and many times. He never condemns me. He always supports me and encourages me. He always leads with his forgiving hand and his welcoming voice. I believe that is precisely what many Catholics yearn for but have never found it here in Church—for whatever reason. And so they stop coming. But He never stops coming. I believe as Catholics you have to learn how to encounter Him but that you can learn. You must want to, however. Those who love us can help us. Please let them help you. Do not be afraid to gather here. Come—be with those who believe. Thomas did and it really made all the difference in his life.