

“Take a Good, Hard Look”

Virginia was 19 years old and pregnant when she went to live with her fifteenth set of foster parents. Her case file read like a textbook example of neglect, abuse, and bureaucratic failure. She sat silently in a chair, hands neatly clasped, staring into her lap. The foster parents, whose three children were in school, had been appraised of Virginia's story and promised that this placement would be “temporary” (“temporary” was the story of Virginia's life).

The foster mother said, *“Are you frightened, Virginia?”* *“Kinda,”* she replied without looking up. Then, *“I've been in lots of homes.”* *“Well,”* the sympathetic woman tried to reassure the bewildered young mother-to-be, *“Let's hope this time turns out for the best.”* Virginia's reply is one of those statements that can stick to your soul — it was flat, without change of tone and without Virginia even looking up — *“Hurts too much to hope.”* Can you imagine? Thomas could.

Thomas was not present when his friends, the other disciples, saw Jesus; not an illusion, nor a phantom — but Jesus! Jesus with the wounds in His hands and side. The rather stiff phrase in our scripture reading, *“. . . the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord,”* hardly communicates the depth of what it must have meant to see it all fulfilled. *“I will see you again,”* Jesus had promised; and after the ugly scene on Friday here He was! But Thomas was not present to experience the joy.

All of us must deal with grief in our own particular way — and that included Thomas. He needed time to deal with his grief before he could join the others. The depth of his hurt was too deep; this is exactly where our lives intersect the road Thomas had to travel. How do you pick up the pieces and go on when you lose someone who has become a basic assumption of your living? *“Dad will always be there to lean on — won't he?”* *“I can always ask mom — can't I?”*

Then it hits. *“No . . . there are times when life hits you with such*

powerful disruption you wonder how you can ever pick up the pieces and go on!” Times when it hurts too much to hope that things could be better. Thomas, the proverbial “seeing is believing” type fellow, had discovered something wonderful in Jesus Christ that had turned his life around.

There is something wonderful about the story of Thomas. If Thomas could find a way out of his grief and hopelessness and go on, then I can also find my way out when I am confronted with such pain. Whatever led him out of the dark place of unfaith and discouragement can become a guiding light for you and me.

We don't have a lot of knowledge about Thomas. As a matter of fact the Gospel of John is the only gospel to gives us any data about the famous “Doubter” — and that information is limited. On one occasion Thomas asked a question and on another made a seemingly “off the wall” suggestion. Yet these two tiny clues provide amazing insight into the inner life of Thomas. Let's take a quick look . . .

In the first incident [John 11], Lazarus had died and Jesus says to his disciples, ***“Lazarus has fallen asleep,”*** and then states, ***“I am going to wake Lazarus up.”*** The disciples don't get it; Lazarus will be okay if he's sleeping they say. *“No... Lazarus is dead,”* Jesus explains. Then comes this incredibly revealing comment from Thomas. ***“Let us also go,”*** he says to his colleagues, ***“that we may die with Him.”***

In other words, if Jesus is going to go and join Lazarus in death, then Thomas is ready to go with him. While our knowledge of Thomas is limited, we know this one thing; Thomas had invested his life in Jesus and he was willing to follow him into death if that's what it took to be near him! Jesus had become the hub around which Thomas' life revolved. Whether he was like “Virginia,” who had never found a home, or was a wanderer who had never found an aim . . . Thomas loved Jesus.

The second incident takes place during what is called The Upper Room Discourse [John 14] when Jesus is attempting to pull things together for his followers in this last evening they will share together. If the disciples

are beginning to finally understand that Jesus is going to die, they are not able to figure how they will go on. Jesus tries to reassure them — remember His words? ***“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.”*** (John 14:1-4) Thomas asks the question most of them might have had on their minds but didn't express, *“Well now — actually Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?”*

Here is the second of two strong clues into Thomas' life that can help us understand the meaning of this morning's gospel. Thomas is one of those “what you see is what you get” kind of guys; he isn't about to sit and pretend he understands when he doesn't. He is that kid you always wanted in your classroom who would risk asking all the things you wanted to ask, but you hesitated because you didn't want to appear to be ignorant — or at least you wanted to go along with the assumption that you knew these things. Jesus says, *“You know [of course] the way to the place where I am going.”* Peter, James, John and the rest sit quietly or perhaps nod in assent — *“Sure, we know . . . mmmhm . . . if you say so.”* Thomas asks. This is Thomas — one who loves Jesus and who basically says what is on his mind. His question yields one of the most quoted portions of scripture in the gospels: ***“I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.”***

A drama of transformation occurs in our scripture and in the life of Thomas as he moves from grief and despair to hope and joy.

First, let's make sure we comprehend the sequence of events as they unfold: Jesus shows up in the locked room a second time when Thomas is there. The first time, when Thomas was not there, Jesus showed the other disciples His hands and side — the marks that prove who He is. All Thomas needs (he says) is to see for himself. So Jesus tells him: *“Take*

a good, hard look, Thomas, and believe.” Thomas is never castigated for doubt — the word for “doubt” never shows up anywhere in the text. Thomas takes his good, hard look and confesses: **“My Lord and my God!”**

Jesus never chides Thomas for his demands to see. What Jesus does warn Thomas about is the risk of falling into unfaith. Thomas had the witness of the community of faith, but he could not bring himself to trust it.

Take a good, hard look at the people around you this morning — this community of faith. Can you trust them? Will they speak truth to you? Sometimes we are afraid that they will (and we won’t want to hear it) and other times equally afraid they may not (because we know we need it).

Take a good, hard look within and ask if you can be trusted to bear witness to the truth . . . trusted to speak the truth in love.

Jesus takes a good, hard look into Thomas and sees a man in crisis. The NRSV blows this translation big time when it quotes Jesus as saying: **“Do not doubt but believe.”** What Jesus says is this: **“Do not become faithless, but faithful.”** Jesus sees Thomas on the precipice of unfaith, and pulls him back from the edge by giving Thomas what Thomas needed: to see for himself.

There are four important lessons which translate directly into our lives and into concepts the church, the community of faith, needs to embrace.

Lesson One: Take a Good Hard Look Within and Give Permission to be Yourself. The disciples gathered, in part, to deal with their grief and experience of loss. Thomas, for whatever reason, could not (or chose not to) work through his grief with the group. He had to have the freedom to be apart before he could be with them. That's important also for you and me as individuals.

We need to give ourselves permission to “do it our way” and not be pushed into “but, everybody does it this way.” One of the difficulties with the popularity of concepts like Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' *Stages of Grief* is

that some people begin to expect others to move in lockstep order from stage one to stage five. “*Yup . . . Thomas is definitely in denial right now . . . we should expect his anger quite soon!*” As we need to give ourselves permission to deal with grief and pain in our own way, so also the community of faith needs to allow for others’ differences in dealing with life's tough times.

Lesson Two: Take a good, hard look at our congregation to see if we leave the door open for fellowship. We're not sure just how it happened, but I think it likely that one or another of the disciples said, “*Hey, we've got to tell Thomas.*” I can't imagine that, given Thomas' response, they then left it to that one telling. In the intervening week, can't you see disciple after disciple approaching Thomas with something like: “*We really did see Him.*” “*We didn't make this up.*”

In any case, they reached out to Thomas and Thomas was open to their contact (How do we know this? Eight days later Thomas is there!) Even in the midst of pain and doubt, an open door to the friendship of others is often the first step on the journey to recovery.

Lesson Three: Take a good, hard look within and then give expression to honest feeling. How many times has someone counseled you with something like, “*You shouldn't feel that way.*” (or) “*You ought not think that way.*” (or) “*You'd better not be that way*”? When Thomas was told the really good news about Jesus, he said in effect, “*It hurts too much to hope.*”

His response may or may not have been the first time someone said, “*Seeing is believing,*” but that's where Thomas was. Our scripture will end with Jesus turning this into a wonderful principle of faith, “*Believing is seeing!*” In a great example of true fellowship, Thomas is able to express — and his friends are able to accept — honest emotion and authentic expression of faith-struggle. It is absolutely crucial for our growth in faith to have freedom to express honest feeling and honest issues with faith.

A basic principle here is: *“We can not work through, and bring faith to, any issue we can not share with our community of faith.”* Acceptance like this has not been the strong suit of many churches, but it must become so! If you spend enough time with people over a long period of time — in all kinds of difficulty, you will discover an important and powerful principle: *“We hide from each other the things we have most in common!”*

Think about it. You’re having a rough patch in your marriage, and feel a sense of failure, so you hide the pain instead of reaching out for help. As a young person you are filled with a sense of being unaccepted, and therefore unacceptable, but instead of reaching out to a parent or teacher, you reach out for an something to dull the pain. You find yourself struggling at work, but feel that asking for help will show inadequacy.

Perhaps most difficult for we pastors to hear is something like the remark of a young man who had been absent from church for some time. By coincidence, he happened to see his pastor at a department store one day and said, *“I don't feel like I can come back to church until I get my act together!”* If there is just one thing we can gain from the experience of Thomas, let it be this . . .

Lesson Four: Jesus takes a good hard look at us and accepts us where we are and gives us strength to get where we need to be! This is a key point of today's scripture. When Jesus finally appears for Thomas (most likely when Thomas was ready to receive it), He doesn't scold, *“Thomas you bonehead! How could you not believe in the resurrection?”* Jesus knows Thomas for who he truly is and gives Thomas what he truly needs.

The result? Thomas fully sees Jesus for who Jesus is — Lord and God. But it could never have happened if Jesus had not met Thomas where Thomas was. This gave Thomas strength to risk hope once again.

Take a good, hard look into today’s Gospel, and you see something much deeper than mere doubt. You see a man, Thomas, who is struggling with his grief and despair — and not doing so particularly well. But you also

see a man who loved and loves his Lord, and that love will go to work in him. You see a community of faith that does not abandon or turn its back on this man in his time of struggle. In this faith community, doors are open and acceptance is assured. And you see Jesus providing what is needed — His presence.

Take a good, hard look this morning. Take a good, hard at every person here today — some are rejoicing because they have experienced the risen Christ; some are in pain because it hurts too much to hope; most are somewhere in between those two extremes. Take a good, hard look to see the other where the other truly is, and not where you think he or she is, and especially not where you think she or he ought to be!

Take a good hard look to see that same Jesus is present with us — in Word, in Sacraments, in this community of faith.

Then take a good, hard, and lasting look at this Jesus (indeed, don't take your eyes off of Him!), because He comes again and again and again to announce to us: ***“Peace is yours.”***

Amen.