

Have you believed because you have seen? When my brother-in-law Bill died in 2015, it broke me in that way that happens sometimes when you lose a best friend, loving family member. The world looks different without the people in it who were instrumental in your life, helping you grow into who you are, being supportive and calling you out in a loving way when you mess up big time. /

I was 10 when Bill started dating my sister Kim. He introduced me to night fishing, skateboarding, John Carpenter's *The Thing*, Bob Segar's Live Album, and my first concert (Rick Springfield). He made a 180-mile round trip to pick up, strangers to him, the maid of honor and her Husband for our wedding. He helped me process through some of the greater challenges I faced up to his passing. It's a different world when they leave it. And even though his death wasn't a surprise, as his multiple myeloma had returned after a short respite, there was still that shock of loss. / (1)

Over the months that followed, despite a faith that told me Bill was in the gentle arms of a loving God, I found that I wanted some kind of tangible connection with him. I wanted a visitation. I wanted to hear his favorite music in some unexpected place, I wanted someone to laugh at something the way he would have. I wanted a sign. (long pause) /

I'm not sure when or why the world saw fit to permanently affix the phrase "doubting" to the name of the apostle Thomas. But it seems to me what he wants is completely reasonable. He just wants what the other disciples have already experienced. /

Have you believed because you have seen? We have two different scenes in today's passage from John's gospel, and they take place one week apart. The first takes place on that first day: the day the Christian church marks as the day of resurrection. It is evening now, and Jesus' closest and dearest have heard the reports from Peter and the disciple Jesus loved about the empty tomb. They have heard Mary Magdalene's breathless announcement, "I have seen the Lord." /

But here they are: holed up in the upper room, behind locked doors. The passage says they are afraid of "the Jews," but that (2)

doesn't make sense, because everyone in that room is a Jew. Maybe they are still afraid of the Romans who, after all, executed Jesus just a few days earlier. Maybe they are afraid of those religious leaders who seemed to encourage the Romans. Maybe they have heard the resurrection story, but just can't quite believe it. Resurrection or no, they are afraid. /

And then, through the locked doors comes Jesus. He comes and stands among them, and says, "Peace. Peace be with you." Jesus comes into a locked place of fear, for stony limits cannot hold love out. And to counter the fear, he offers, instead, peace. /

And he shows them the marks of the crucifixion on his body, as if to say, "Yes, it's really me." /

This is confusing because Jesus' body seems both very real and also like an apparition. There are ways in which it is continuous with Jesus' body before his death—there are those scars, after all. But there are also ways in which it is discontinuous with his body before death, he can appear out of thin air, through a locked door. Jesus has a (3)

resurrection body, which is somehow different. It is new. It is mysterious. /

Jesus offers peace, but what the appearance and revealing of his body gives his friends is joy. In this moment, they move from fear to joy. They move from uncertainty to the relief that this is Jesus, mysterious though he is in this moment. But I wonder, have they believed because they have seen? (pause) /

And then Jesus says, again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” Jesus says, and then, he breathes on the disciples, and gives them the Holy Spirit, Holy Breath. In this gospel, there is no waiting for Pentecost: the Holy Spirit/ Wind/ Breath is given now. And with it, words about sin. (pause) /

The word “sin” has taken on such weight in the Christian world. There are, frankly, so many for whom the word is loaded with shame, feelings of humiliation, and the seeming impossibility of ever climbing out of a pit of self-loathing. The certainty that there is nothing you can do, ever, to be *right*. To be OK. To be good. / (4)

So, let's get back to the biblical understanding of sin. The Greek word behind the English word is ha-mar-T-uh (*hamartia*), and means, "miss." As in, "Oops! I missed!" in much the way an archer might miss the center of the target. (pause) /

Look, I know that there are things we do very deliberately that separate us from one another and cause real harm. There are also mistakes we make, times we go "oops!," and the whole exercise of human morality is located on the spectrum between these two. But Jesus, in talking about sin, uses this word that does not come with the heaviness we have heaped on our understanding of sin. /

He says, "If you release the misses of any, they are released. If you retain them, they are retained." With the Holy Spirit comes Holy responsibility. Jesus anticipates the church, having the power to either remove the spiritual burden of sin from people or to leave it there to crush them. While Jesus doesn't express a particular preference for either here, in other places he is clear: forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. For God so loved the world, the church is empowered to be in the business of forgiveness. We are (5)

commissioned to lift that burden from people's souls, not crush them with judgement. (pause) /

There is a little postscript to this story: "But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe'" (John 20:24-25). /

In this first scene, Jesus' closest and dearest were missing another one of their own, and it's not clear why. It's possible that this is to Thomas' credit, alone among the twelve, he was out and about, not in hiding, not afraid, continuing with Jesus' work. But it's also possible that Thomas was not just not there, but that he no longer counted himself among them. It's possible that the devastation of Jesus' death had driven Thomas away, that he no longer found solace as one of the friends and followers of Jesus. And so, when they told him, "We have seen the Lord!," he lays out what it is he wants to see: exactly the same that everyone else has seen. Plus, something more. He doesn't just want (6)

to see. He wants to touch. And when Thomas is with his friends in the upper room a week later, he gets exactly what he wants. (pause) /

Four hundred + years ago the Italian baroque painter Caravaggio put the finishing touches on his work, “The Incredulity of Saint Thomas.” Not only is it a masterpiece, it also provides an unsettling image: Thomas’ is bent down and has drawn his face close to Jesus’ torso, to see the wound made by the spear in Jesus’ side. At the same time, Jesus’ hand on Thomas’ arm is guiding the apostle’s finger into his wound. /

It’s not a comfortable image. It reminds us how very intimate touch can be, how bold is Thomas’ demand. And it also reminds us of the limitations of seeing. /

Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite pastors, wrote the book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*. In her chapter, “The Eyes of the Blind,” Taylor talks about the sense of sight:

“Scientists estimate that 70% of our sense receptors are in our eyes. When our eyes are working, they can allow the other senses to sit back and relax... they can shoulder the burden of taking in most necessary information. But have you noticed that we sometimes (7)

close our eyes to think? We close our eyes to kiss. Some of you tell me that you close your eyes so that you can listen to my sermons without distraction, and I believe you, even with the snoring. But seeing is not a particularly intimate sense. Seeing allows us to stay at a distance.

Astronauts can see Paris from outer space, because it really is the City of Light. The other senses insist on greater intimacy. You can't smell the freshly laundered shirt on your little boy from outer space. You can't even smell it from the next room. You have to be close for that. The same goes for hearing. We can yell and make ourselves heard, especially in an environment with good acoustics, like a mountainside or a sanctuary. But your beloved generally doesn't want you screaming what you love about her; she'd rather you whispered, and to whisper, you must be close. You have to be close to touch, too. This is a sense that insists on proximity." (long pause) /

Thomas doesn't settle for sight; he insists on touch, on closeness, on intimacy. (long pause) /

Do you know when I got my wish, and started once again to sense my deceased brother-in-law/best friends' presence? My mom had (8)



had a forklift accident and broke her leg. She was staying with my sister Kim while recovering from surgery. I went to take care of her a few days before my other sister could come. Kim was headed to Hawaii with family to sprinkle Bill's ashes on the islands of his birth. I went by the mortuary to pick up his ashes, before they left. Weird as it sounds, holding Bill's remains, I was overwhelmed with his presence. He became tangible and though his body was now dust, I could feel his presence in an old familiar way. We wept together, we laughed together, we made dark humored jokes about the moment, and the mortician perhaps thought I was insane. /

Back at my sister's house, Bill was everywhere. In the eyes of his kids. In the feel of his pocketknife next to the bed I was sleeping in. On the rolls Royce of toilets, he had me help him install while on a med that sometime cause people to buy expensive purchases like cars. Bill bought an elaborate toilet. Suddenly I remembered his voice more clearly, and even some things he'd said that I'd almost forgotten. (long pause) / (9)

Have you believed because you have seen? Or have you touched me as well? Jesus touched people all the time. He laid hands on people to cast demons out of them. He made paste with his spit and rubbed it into unseeing eyes to make them see again. He took dead children and nearly dead adults by the hand, as he coaxed them back from death to life. He broke bread and called it his body, and poured out wine and called it his blood, and gave it to his friends to eat. He wrapped a towel around his waist and washed his friends' feet, and told them to do the same for one another, and for the world. /

Even in his mysterious resurrection body, Jesus connects to his people through touch. /

When Jesus died on Calvary, his friends were broken-hearted in that way we are about the loss of people we've given our hearts to, those we truly believe will change the world. When the hope of that change diminishes, it threatens to extinguish that light in us that says, this is a better way. This is God's way. It's a different world when they leave it. And of course, there is deep shock at such a loss. (pause) / (10)

Isn't it possible that, over the days that followed, despite their hope that these stories of the resurrection were true, Jesus' friends found that they wanted some kind of tangible proof? They wanted an encounter, a visitation. They wanted to see him and know it wasn't just a mirage. They wanted a sign. Thomas wasn't the outlier. He was just the one who was honest about it. /

////// "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus asks. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This story takes a turn here. Of course, everyone in the story so far has seen Jesus, all Jesus' closest and dearest, the twelve, Mary Magdalene, they've all seen him. Some have even touched him. But now the story opens up the locked door of fear and allows others in, others who haven't been to the upper room, or to the tomb. Others who hope, but also wonder; who fear, but also search. Others who are looking for signs of reassurance, who are listening for words of comfort, who are reaching out their hands and hearts to touch the undefinable. /

That's us. Blessed are we, who have not seen Jesus, not exactly, but who have believed, because we have heard the story. Who have (10)

trusted because we have seen what the full flower of faith looks like when it is poured out in love. Who have touched one another's hands or laid a hand on one another's shoulders or opened our arms for a healing embrace. Blessed are we, separated from these events and stories by century upon century, who nevertheless wander in our imaginations into the upper room, longing for the Holy-Spirit breathed church to lift our burdens from our hearts and welcome us into the fold of Jesus' kin. Blessed, blessed, blessed are we. Thanks be to God. Amen. /////