

Lent 5, Year A // Sunday, April 2, 2017 // Saint Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia
Thomas, Lazarus, and a *Both/And* Faith

I'm an animal lover — and I'm a *both/and* animal lover rather than an either/or. I'm *both* a cat person *and* a dog person. But I will admit that my dog right now, a short little thing with a Labrador face and these squatty Beagle-ish legs, black with white feet, a white badge on his chest, would not have been my first choice had I gotten to pick. This dog had been living next door to my sister in Crozet, Virginia, but was abandoned when his owners moved out. My sister and brother-in-law fed him and put some hay in a dog house. But at the time they had a newborn, a two-year-old, and four cats of their own. The dog couldn't stay forever and ultimately, they decided to take him to a shelter unless—the big unless—I came to get him.

And so, two winters ago, my very soft-hearted husband-to-be, rode with me in the freezing rain to fetch a dog neither of us really wanted — a dog about which all I knew was that he barked chronically, wouldn't let anyone touch him, was not that cute, and, for some reason, most egregious to me of all, his name was Thomas. Thomas the dog. Couldn't he at least be named something...doggier?

We pulled up and there was Thomas, standing in the rain like a fool. But he let us put a leash on him and pick him up, and put him in the back of the Subaru. For all Thomas knew, he was headed to some perilous end. For all he knew, we could have been evil, wicked people. He sat upright in the backseat, panting, and did not take his eyes off me. These not particularly beautiful brown eyes staring me down as if to say: I'm really sorry. I have fleas, and worms. And a double ear infection. And I am going to cost you a lot of money and steal your cat's food and obliterate what you leave on the countertops and be generally a nuisance to your entire neighborhood. Those eyes that said, *Here I am; you don't have to love me. Just don't let me die.*

It was only going to be a trial weekend. But a year and a half later, Thomas sleeps in the bed, plays in the yard, fears my cat, and is one of the neediest, whiniest, best things to happen to my little life.

I admit I considered changing his name. My cat's name is Jack and having two pets with human names, Jack and Thomas, just felt ridiculous. But I couldn't do it. He was too much a Thomas. And now of course, I have recreated the narrative and say that he is named for Saint Thomas, one of my favorite apostles. Doubtful and hesitant Thomas, faithful Thomas, pleading Thomas. Thomas who traveled far and tried hard to be good. I think about what Anne Lamott wrote: about how a dog is Jesus in a tiny fur coat. In this case, it's an apostle in a sometimes foul-smelling coat that sheds.

Whenever Thomas the Apostle appears in the Gospel, I feel this little twinge of identity— as though he's a little bit mine. And the thing about today's lesson—in which Lazarus is raised from the dead and in which Thomas says this bewildering sentence “Let us also go, that we may die with him”— is that it's at once a baffling story and yet, somehow, also perfectly sensible. It's a *both/and*. It's both unexplainable and also true. Which is the quintessential definition for faith. Because what else *is* faith but a belief in what might seem otherwise incomprehensible, irrational, impossible, and also still strangely provable because it is able to be *felt*. Faith is both mysterious and clear, impossible and true.

Here is your quick English lesson for the day:

You know the word proof, as in evidence. To prove, as in to establish the fact of— the kind of proof Saint Thomas sought and found when he wished to touch the wounds of Jesus in order to believe. He needs proof in order to confirm his faith. Prove also has an extended definition from the Latin meaning worthy, good, and virtuous.

What I love, though, is this little gem of knowledge: proof is a word used in baking, some of you know this, I'm sure, but maybe didn't know I could find a way to connect it to the Lazarus story—proof, in baking, means “to rise.” It is the second rise, or final rise, a specific rest period for dough as it prepares itself to become bread. How is that for a metaphor! How is that for evidence that there are little miracles all around us: Lazarus is raised and we have our proof — impossible, but true.

I have gotten myself in knots over this story. What does it all mean? Why *didn't* Jesus come when he knew Lazarus was dying? What does Thomas mean? And why resurrect Lazarus if he just has to die again? I'm trying to take the advice I would give you if this were a poetry class— I'd say, “relax.” I'd say, “hold it lightly,” “calm down,” “un-knot” yourself. I'd say, “the answer is in the question and the question, in this case, is one of faith—a belief in what you know to be true though you may not be able to explain it.”

I'm inclined to identify with Mary and Martha in this story, when they say to Jesus, essentially, “where have you been? why didn't you come?” It reminds me of the ten thousand questions I have about this both/and faith business. How can there be *both* God *and* cancer. God *and* terrorism. God *and* evil. God *and* despair. Where **HAVE** you been? And where are you now? “Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord,” says Psalm 130. But why and how, if God is God, are there any depths in the first place?

I do not know. Except that it is a matter of faith, of trust in what we cannot fully understand. Mary and Martha question Jesus as have I. I remember when my grandmother died and people at her funeral said, “it is for the best” and both my mother and I wanted to scream: No it's not! This is not the best. The best would be if people didn't get sick and die. The best would be if there were no cancer. The best would be if there were no grief. And how do you *know* it's for the best? I can't help but wonder why, if Jesus can be moved and feel pain and weep, why can't he save us from our trouble?

But, like Mary and Martha, I tend to misjudge the power of the divine. They believe that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus's death, but they don't seem to imagine that Jesus can actually resurrect him from the dead. I, too, might expect too little. I love what C.S. Lewis says in his book, *Mere Christianity*, that many Christians think of God as one who comes into our lives to do a little rearranging, when what God is actually trying to do is give us a whole new life. We expect God to rearrange the furniture, but God's building a whole new mansion.

See? On one hand, a life of faith is impossibly perplexing and we can so easily get caught up—or bound, as Lazarus is literally bound and as Thomas is bound by his own skepticism— we may be bound by our own analytical, rational brains. By our own desire for clarity and answers and proof.

On the other hand, the faithful have faith in what cannot always be explained, or seen. The faithful know that our suffering is not for nothing, and that our grief and sorrow and bewilderment is somehow part of a wholeness we may not understand.

I am certain of very little. But I do know that the essence of faith is believing that divine wisdom, no matter how little sense it makes to me, is indeed wise and true.

Lazarus gets a second chance at a life of faith. And those who are present get to witness a divine miracle and their faith is confirmed. Of course, Lazarus has to die his physical death all over again. And he probably had to endure all over again whatever his earthly suffering and hardships were. But in the raising of Lazarus so God also raises Mary and Martha and Thomas and all of us so that we might affirm our faith by the miracle we know to be true. I think there are these little resurrections, little miracles every day, every morning we are reborn, every meal we are sustained, every night we are given rest, and every walk I take with that mangy mutt named Thomas I am reminded that the possibility of a new life is there and the very things threatening to undo me— my own doubt, my darkness, my anxiety, my tendency to project onto others what I despise in myself, and on and on and on, all the ways I might be dead to the world, or cut off from God, or blind to beauty—see, the things threatening to undo me, to kill my spirit, might very well be the source of my own healing and the genesis of my own resurrection.

As it might be for you, too. To die to what binds us is to be born anew. And I think God must resurrect us a million times, and give us a million chances to keep believing what we always believed but somehow believe it *harder*, believe it *more*.

Sometimes we need reminding that the divine is possible at every moment. Which is the best news I know to tell: God has answered, and is answering still. As Jesus says to Thomas, “thou hast seen me, thou hast believed.”

When I said to Thomas the dog on that rainy January night, “I’ve come for you, now get in the car and trust me” he just *did*. And when finally we arrived home, and I opened the door, and gave him something to eat and a bed to lie down on and said *here* he knew nothing but to eat, and then to sleep, and then to rise again, this time in a new life. It was its own proof.

I believe what I have always known to be true— that proof of God is all around us—and I am as much Mary and Martha as I am Thomas and Lazarus— desiring a miracle all the time if only to be reminded that I—and we— do get a million chances to be faithful and that I am not alone. Neither are you. This is enough to save a life.

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April, 2017