

April 24, 2022
The Second Sunday of Easter, Year C
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Acts 5:27-32
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Today's reading from John begins on the day of the resurrection. The disciples are gathered behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews." I wish I'd either struck "of the Jews" from that sentence, or changed "Jews" to "Judeans," as we did for the Good Friday reading of the Passion according to John. But by the time I thought of it, the bulletins were already printed.

John's passion has been used to further anti-Semitism for nearly the entire history of Christianity. As one scholar summarizes the problem, "This gospel persistently uses the phrase 'the Jews' to describe those who conspired to kill Jesus. This language shifted the blame for the death of Jesus in medieval Christianity from Roman authorities to the Jewish people as a whole." This anti-Semitism reached a peak during the medieval era, such that, "In the Middle Ages ... Good Friday was a dangerous time for Jews." "It was common for Jewish houses to be attacked with stones. Often these attacks were led by the clergy." And it sometimes spilled over into "violence and bloodshed."¹

Pontius Pilate said to Jesus on Good Friday, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?"² Jesus was killed by an occupying government with authoritarian power. Those disciples had every reason to be afraid, but not of the Jews. We need to be careful about propagating misinformation that historically was and still is being used to harm others. Christian anti-Semitism is a particularly egregious problem, and it is on the rise. Let's be aware of it so that we can help to stop it.

Now I'm going to completely shift gears.

In my first career, I was an engineer. The budding engineer tends to possess certain traits and behaviors. These traits and behaviors are highly rewarded in engineering school and engineering practice, and so they are magnified and reinforced. Unfortunately, the traits and behaviors that make an excellent engineer are often exactly what non-engineers find *annoying*.

If you don't know what I mean, just ask someone who is married to an engineer. You can even ask someone who is married to someone who *used to be* an engineer, even if that someone has done something entirely different for twenty years. The oft-beleaguered spouse-of-an-engineer is likely to tell you that the engineer is interested only in logic and facts, feels great certainty about the conclusions they reached using them, and tunes out anyone who tries to convince them otherwise. They might add that changing the engineer's mind requires rather forcefully presented evidence.

To offer my personal version of an old adage, you can take the woman out of the chemical plant, but you can't take the engineer out of the woman. It has been a long time since I worked as an engineer, but what I'll call my engineer self remains one part of my personality. In our home, she's the one who manages basic technology and performs minor repairs and researches major purchases. Most of the time, she is a problem-solver who pitches in when needed.

But in times of stress? Thinking about this reminded me of those sponge-growing capsules. They come in packages of a dozen and are marketed as children's party favors. They look like regular medicine or vitamin capsules. The directions printed on one brand say this: "Drop capsule in warm or hot water. / Watch it begin to change shape. / In a few minutes it will change into a dinosaur."³

When I am dropped into the hot water of stress, the "engineer" part of my personality has been known to grow like a sponge into a dinosaur—a T-Rex, to be specific. Given the opportunity, she will rise up, take over, and dig in—irritable, stubborn, and hungry, if not for meat, then for logic and facts. She is not my best self.

I'm in a position to poke fun at engineers, but I think—I hope—that this points to a paradox that is universal. The things that make us tick have the potential to be both quietly constructive in the moderation of tranquil times and noisily destructive in the excess of stressful times.

Now that you know way too much about me, let's turn again to today's gospel. It offers us the story of Jesus and Thomas, our patron saint. One of Thomas's symbols is a carpenter's square. That's because he is reputed to have built churches all the way from Palestine to India, where he was martyred. Thomas was not an engineer, but, in my experience, engineers and builders are a lot alike. Maybe that's why Thomas needed evidence.

Some commentators say about this passage that Thomas wants only what the other disciples had already received. Maybe, but I'm not certain about that. In this text, touch isn't mentioned during Jesus' first appearance to the disciples. Later, it's Thomas who brings it up, as he hinges belief not only to *seeing* but also to *touching* Jesus. In this, Thomas seems to raise the ante. Thomas raises it, and Jesus meets it. A week later—which is to say, today—Jesus arrives, giving Thomas what he needs. It may even be that Jesus *insists* on giving Thomas what he needs, as he *directs* Thomas to perform the touch that Thomas has said is necessary.

The text doesn't specify whether Thomas actually touches Jesus. I tend to imagine that he does. Maybe that's because I can relate. As I see it, Thomas hears something that flies in the face of logic and facts. Of course he seeks evidence. And of course he takes all the evidence he can get.

This week for the first time I came across on Denise Levertov's poem, "St. Thomas Didymus." I don't know how I missed it before. In the poem, she also imagines Thomas reaching out and actually physically touching Jesus. It's a long poem, and so I'm going to read only the end. It goes like this:

I needed
 blood to tell me the truth,
the touch
 of blood. Even
my sight of the dark crust of it
 round the nailholes
didn't thrust its meaning all the way through
 to that manifold knot in me
that willed to possess all knowledge,
 refusing to loosen
unless that insistence won
 the battle I fought with life

But when my hand
 led by His hand's firm clasp
entered the unhealed wound,
 my fingers encountering
rib-bone and pulsing heat,
 what I felt was not
scalding pain, shame for my
 obstinate need,
but light, light streaming
 into me, over me, filling the room
as I had lived till then
 in a cold cave, and now
coming forth for the first time,
 the knot that bound me unravelling,
I witnessed
 all things quicken to color, to form,
my question
 not answered but given
 its part
in a vast unfolding design lit
 by a risen sun.⁴

Let me repeat two of those lines: "I felt ... not / ... shame for my / obstinate need, / but light, light streaming / into me ..." And this one: "my question / not answered but given / its part / in a vast unfolding design lit / by a risen sun."

Maybe, in those first days after the resurrection, Jesus gives every one of those disciples exactly what they need, and thereby he replaces shame with light. If, for example, to Thomas Jesus gives evidence, then to Mary Magdalene he gives consolation, and to Peter he gives understanding. As he does so, apparent weaknesses are revealed to also be strengths. That is how they become the first people to propagate the gospel, so that it can be passed down through the generations ... to us.

At the end of our reading, we hear Jesus bless “those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” In other words, he blesses us. He even turns our shame into light. We are perfect just as we are.

“Peace be with you,’ Jesus says. In other words, Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid of Jews. Don’t be afraid of gay people or trans people. Don’t be afraid of people who are afraid of Jews or gay people or trans people. Receive the Holy Spirit, who will fill your need, and turn your shame into light. Receive. Love.

Notes

¹ Daniel Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, “Why Good Friday was dangerous for Jews in the Middle Ages and how that changed,” *The Conversation*, April 15, 2019, available online at <https://theconversation.com/why-good-friday-was-dangerous-for-jews-in-the-middle-ages-and-how-that-changed-114896> (accessed April 24, 2022).

² John 19:10 NRSV.

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https://www.amazon.com/dp/B094K12D9W/ref=sspa_dk_detail_3?psc=1&pd_rd_i=B094K12D9W&pd_rd_w=3LJI3&pf_rd_p=0c758152-61cd-452f-97a6-17f070f654b8&pd_rd_wg=ufgqH&pf_rd_r=0XARX1K2YBJ5W3DDR99Z&pd_rd_r=51a37e35-2376-48ed-a751-900ed11f69ff&s=toys-and-games&spLa=ZW5jcnlwdGVkUXVhbGlmaWVyPUEyRUY5OFYyTzBZNjNUJmVuY3J5cHRIZElkPUEwNTI2NjAxMjUwOkFDVkl1YSzNDRSZlbnNyeXB0ZWRBZEIkPUEwNTE0MzI4MjNRSFoyNU0SE9HWSZ3aWRnZXROYW11PXNwX2RldGFpbCZhY3Rpb249Y2xpY2tSZWRpcmVjdCZkb05vdExvZ0NsaWNrPXRydWU=

⁴ Excerpt from Denise Levertov, “St. Thomas Didymus,” in *The Stream and the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 83-84. The full text of the poem is posted online by *Radical Discipleship* at https://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/2007/10/st-thomas-didymus.html?mkt_tok=MDQxLUJLQS04NjYAAAGD60nGbY4mxV6g1PIWW5zW-HqR7FCv3dSao42Lw7kbzTdeJXCu_AuMoWcROzNYDspGYV8MMNZoCmgULxNIVXxl25nWsZPgxd4ISQ0Vdx0 (accessed April 24, 2022). Note that the poem’s line indentation is different in the online posting than in the book. In the text above, I have attempted to reproduce the original.