

*Gracious God, be present with this Your gathered people. As we listen for Your Word, teach us quietness and trust. Show us that our hope is in You, the Author of our salvation.<sup>1</sup> May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

In political discourse these days, it would seem that size and force are everything. We hear of structures and weapons and initiatives that are monumental: huge walls, giant missiles, the “mother of all bombs,”<sup>2</sup> the most massive tax cut you’ve ever seen. We watch as vast numbers of troops march in formation—it might be North Korea at the moment, but it really doesn’t matter which country, because in so many cultures over the centuries, power has been understood as unmatched size and overwhelming force.

Well, worldly force does not impress us Christians. We see how empires inevitably fall and monuments crumble to dust. We worship One whose “power is made perfect in weakness,”<sup>3</sup> who humbled himself even to death: Jesus Christ, whose Name is above every name<sup>4</sup> that fear could whisper or brutality could shout. This morning, we will celebrate *that* power—the power not of coercion but of love—as we welcome a very small new believer into the Body of Christ through Holy Baptism.

Little Josephine James Moore may not be able to build a massive wall or deploy an enormous army. I understand that she has mastered sleeping through the night and

is now working on object permanence—those are her immediate goals. But she and those who speak for her are about to do something monumental. They're about to link her life with the One in whom God has worked, and continues to work, extraordinary “deeds of power.”<sup>5</sup> Josephine will be marked as Christ's own forever. There is no power greater than this.<sup>6</sup>

When we gather at the baptismal font with Josephine, we will promise to be faithful as a community. We'll promise to testify to what we know of God; to sing and pray and gather at the Communion Table with Josephine every time she comes to church. We promise we'll listen when she begins to share what *she* is figuring out about God.

Today is the second Sunday of Easter: theologically speaking, it's one of the best days of the Church year on which we could welcome a tiny new believer. Every year on this Sunday,<sup>7</sup> we read the story of the disciple known as “Doubting Thomas.” There's no empire on display here, no impregnable citadel, no army marching forth. This is a counter-story, a story *against* empire, and its protagonist, Thomas, might seem an unlikely hero. But he is just the witness we need as we prepare to welcome Josephine into the Body of Christ.

As we rejoin the Easter narrative in the Gospel of John, you'll remember that Mary Magdalene had been weeping outside the tomb when the risen Jesus appeared to

her. In our lesson this morning, Jesus has appeared to the disciples, giving them the Holy Spirit. Astonishing things ... but where was Thomas?

Our hero was not at the empty tomb. He was not there where Jesus appeared to the others. Thomas comes late to the story of resurrection. He hasn't seen the risen Christ, and so he stands for all of us who haven't seen a vision of Christ, all those through the centuries who have been welcomed into this community late. Thomas hears the witness of the other disciples, sure, but he doesn't buy it. Everyone tells him Jesus is alive, but what is he supposed to do, just believe this absurdity without proof? Just surrender his God-given intellect and trust the impossible claim that the others are making?

NO. "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."

That's *courage*, right there. Not "doubt," not some kind of weak, tentative faith. That's *integrity*. That's honoring the man Thomas had loved and followed, the man who had changed his understanding of God and given him a new kind of hope for which he barely had words. Thomas was the one who had stood with Jesus against every threat. When Jesus went off to continue his ministry right after a mob had tried to stone him, Thomas was the one who had called to the others, "Let us also go, so that we may die with him."<sup>8</sup> Thomas was fearless and devoted. They had all watched Jesus die a torturous death three days ago. Did that mean nothing to the

others? Well, Thomas would not so easily forget. “Unless I see ... unless I touch his wounds, I will not believe.”

A week passes. Imagine what a week that must have been for Thomas! Every day unfolding in slow motion, Thomas waking to the heaviness of grief settling on him like a shroud. Flashbacks to the trauma coming unbidden,<sup>9</sup> Thomas surely heard sounds he didn't want to remember, surely had to keep pushing away the terrible image of the cross outlined against that dark sky. At every meal, he would have had to listen to Mary Magdalene and the others so joyful, so sure that Jesus had been raised. In the streets of Jerusalem, he would have watched other believers struggle with their own sadness, disoriented<sup>10</sup> and unsure how to move forward with the work Jesus had given them to do.

An exhausting week goes by. And then it happens: Jesus appears again.

He *has* been raised! “See my hands ... reach out your hand and put it in my side.” What Jesus had suffered was real<sup>11</sup>—and yet there he stands before Thomas, radiant! And Thomas finally understands.

This Jesus who kept saying he and the Father were one,<sup>12</sup>

who kept urging believers to love one another—

he is God's grace, beloved<sup>13</sup> and wounded and healed and raised!

Later it would be written down this way:

“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth.”<sup>14</sup>

Thomas’s confession, “My Lord and my God!” names the central theological claim of the Gospel of John: Jesus and God are one.

Thomas has led us to the heart of our faith:

God’s grace is among us,

witnessed as eternal Word and wisdom, yes,

but also witnessed as real love and real woundedness and real exaltation!

God’s grace is real, and the empire of death cannot overcome it!<sup>15</sup>

In a moment, we will move toward the baptismal font with our eyes wide open,

knowing the suffering of the world,

honoring the truth of that as our patron, St. Thomas, has taught us to do;

and nevertheless claiming, for Josephine and for every beloved child of God,

the matchless power of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ,

to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

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Easter 2A

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

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<sup>1</sup> See Isaiah 30:15.

<sup>2</sup> On 13 April 2017, President Trump dropped on a town in Afghanistan the largest non-nuclear explosive device available to the United States military. The acronym for this “Massive Ordnance Air Blast” bomb (MOAB) has apparently yielded a nickname among U.S. troops for the device: “Mother of All Bombs.”

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9.

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 2:9.

<sup>5</sup> From Peter’s speech about Jesus in our epistle lesson this morning (Acts 2:22).

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:10.

<sup>7</sup> John 20:19-31 is the Gospel lection for Easter 2 in years A, B, and C of the Revised Common Lectionary.

<sup>8</sup> John 11:16.

<sup>9</sup> Intrusive thoughts, perception of unwelcome images, and audiation of unwelcome sounds can be experienced at unpredictable times by those who witnessed or experienced a traumatic event and have been unable to integrate what they saw and felt. See Judith Herman’s classic work, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, orig. 1992; reprinted with a new epilogue, 2015), and other works in the field of trauma studies. In John 20, Thomas insists on verifying the marks of Jesus’ wounds before assenting to the material reality of Jesus’s resurrection; on that point, I consider this comment by Herman to be relevant: “Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (2). Truth-telling about the suffering of Jesus and countless others in history is essential for honest witness, as liberation theologians long have recognized. Without that honesty, we cannot effectively preach an incarnated and risen Lord who was, and is, the agent of transformation of real life with its agonies and its joys. Here a comment by Herman about psychological and social healing may be relevant for the resilience of the Church: “The liberation of recovery feels both ordinary and miraculous. We who engage with survivors in the process of recovery gain inspiration and courage to persevere despite hearing stories of cruelty that repeatedly stagger our imagination” (276).

<sup>10</sup> As the Emmaus story in Luke 24 makes clear, it was not immediately understood that Jesus had been raised.

<sup>11</sup> I am not persuaded by Herman Ridderbos (*The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, at 647) that

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Jesus's invitation to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side," parroted Thomas's earlier asseveration as a way of shaming the disciple for his lack of faith in the testimony of the other disciples. To be sure, mildly ironic rebuke is characteristic of the way this Gospel presents Jesus's interactions with those who, within the plot, come gradually to understand who Jesus is. But shaming? No. The entire Gospel is written for those who, like Thomas, had not seen empirical evidence of Christ's resurrection and lordship over death (20:29-31). Thomas's initial resistance serves a vital function: marking the starting position of those in the implied audience who may resist Christian claims but yearn for belief and dare to go deeper into the mystery of Christ through reading the Gospel of John.

<sup>12</sup> John 10:30; consider also Thomas's acclamation in our passage this morning, "My Lord and my God!" For Jesus and the Father as united while yet distinct, see John 12:44-45, 14:1-11, and 15:23-24. Marianne Meye Thompson (*John*; New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015) offers this about Thomas's confession: "Thomas's confession cannot mean that the risen Jesus alone is God, since earlier Jesus had distinguished himself from 'the only true God' and from 'my God and your God' (cf. 17:3; 20:17). The Father and the Son are not simply 'collapsed' into one, nor has the one whom Jesus himself so recently identified as 'my God' (20:17) become the crucified and risen Lord himself. But the acclamation of the risen one as 'My Lord and my God!' acknowledges the inclusion of Jesus, the Word made flesh, in the identity of that one called 'the only true God' (1:1, 14), thus marking the other end of the confessional arc begun in the Gospel's opening verses...." (425).

<sup>13</sup> "This is my beloved Son": Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22. For a unique instance of Christ called "the Beloved" (via a passive participle of ἀγαπάω), see Ephesians 1:6.

<sup>14</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>15</sup> In John's theology of the preexistent Word, the evangelist articulates Christ's unassailable power over all empires earthly and spiritual. See the Prologue and especially 1:3-5: "All things came into being through him.... What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."