

“THE SECOND MILE”

Isaiah 42:1-9; John 20:24-31

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When you read from the gospels, a good question to ask is: “Why is this story being told?” We can see in today’s story that Jesus appears a second time to the disciples for the benefit of Thomas and although Thomas is the object of Jesus’ concern, he is not the intended audience. He was there. He knows what happened. This is a story for someone else, and Jesus speaks directly to that someone else. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The gospel writer goes on to say that “these words are written so that you (the reader) may come to believe...” This is a story for the faith community, and among the faithful are followers who never met Jesus, who are completely dependent on the witnesses.

It’s a fantastic story: a rabbi leading a reformation of the faith, interpreting the scriptures with a new authority, performing miracles, healing, and upsetting the powerful who put him to death. And then he comes back from the dead. Hard to believe, especially for those who weren’t there.

And so John tells us a story about a disciple who wasn’t there the first time and maybe Thomas really said these words, but they might as well be our words. “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.”

Thomas gets a lot of sympathy. Thomas the doubter. Thomas the skeptic. I don’t care much for these labels. I prefer Thomas the curious. He just wants to know. But what is it that he wants to know? He doesn’t just want to see that Jesus is alive. He wants to touch the wounds. He wants to know that the time that he has spent with Jesus was real; that the Jesus who did all those wonderful things, the Jesus who suffered and died, was the same Jesus who was alive.

So why is this story being told? For the doubters, the skeptics, and the curious who weren’t there; so that we could get straight what the claims about Jesus really meant. The gospel opens with the claim that the “word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God became a human being and showed how to be human. Jesus went to weddings and when the host family was running low on wine, which would be to fall short in hospitality, he covered for them and supplied a great vintage. He showed us that it was okay to talk to the marginalized, offering “living water” to a woman excluded from the community of faith. He challenged the common belief that disability was the result of sin, when he heals a man born blind. He wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. He refused to strike back when the authorities became frightened by his popularity and put him to death. And most important for today’s story is that he bore the scars from the crucifixion.

When Thomas touches Jesus wounds, he sees that God has entered the world through Jesus, that God has taken on human flesh. Thomas understands that he has met God in the person of Jesus. "My Lord and my God" are the words that declare his faith. With these words he acknowledges that everything that has happened was real: the miracles, the healings, the breaking down barriers, the courage to stand up to the powers that would destroy, the inevitable death and unimaginable resurrection. He grasped the cost to God for so loving the world, and the power to overcome evil.

But this is Thomas. What about the reader for whom this story is told? We didn't see Jesus do any of these things. We didn't touch the wounds. We still have our doubts. Our curiosity hasn't been satisfied. Jesus calls us blessed because we have come to believe. Now how did that happen?

John doesn't really say. He offers up his gospel as a witness in the hope that we will believe him. He gives this example of someone who wasn't there the first time, someone whom Jesus returns for. To use a metaphor from another gospel Jesus walks a second mile with Thomas. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells his followers that if someone asks them to walk a mile, they should walk two. If someone strikes you on the cheek, you should turn the other to them. Scholars have written volumes about just these two sayings, but the salient point for this context is that redemption happens with the other cheek and with the second mile. I'm suggesting that Thomas comes to faith when Jesus walks the second mile with him.

I know this violates all the rules of sound biblical interpretation, but I'm really struck by this image of Jesus walking the second mile with us. I think we hear the stories about Jesus, but they only begin to resonate with us in the second mile of the journey. We begin to believe them because something in our experience recognizes the truth. For me this comes in the realization that if God was in Christ, then God could be in us too. Something in our experience says that God still loves the world. Even when we're not in the room, God doesn't abandon us.

We know this as we walk that second mile. We may not touch the wounds of Christ, but we're familiar with the wounds of the hungry, the stranger, and the oppressed; and Jesus invites us to see him in these the least of his friends. This is the blessing of those who believe without having seen. In the second mile, they become witnesses of the mighty works of God. They understand that God can and does enter human life both to bless, to suffer with us, and to raise us to new life.

Thomas missed that first meeting, but he didn't abandon the faith community. He expressed his doubts, but he kept walking. He was there the next time Jesus showed up. We weren't there for either meeting, but if we stick around, and keep walking, Jesus shows up. We may not touch the wounds, but we experience the presence and the love.

We may be anxious for our world today. We may want to shut the doors against all the trouble, but Jesus shows up and as Janet told us last week, he speaks peace into our

fear, he gifts us with the Spirit of God, and he sends us to bear witness. Just keep walking. A lot happens in the second mile. Thanks be to God. Amen.