

2 Easter C: 7 April 2013

"There are many truths of which the full meaning cannot be realized until personal experience has brought it home." *John Stuart Mill*

Well, it's Easter now. Will be for 50 days. The Great Fifty Days, we call this period. Of course not many people know this, or really pay attention to it.

"What do you mean?" they ask; "Isn't Easter just one special day?"

And of course the answer is "Yes and no."

"Yes," Easter *is* one special day,

the day we celebrate as Christ's victory over death and the grave and consequently our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!

But also "No," Easter is *not only* that one day:

however we may understand it, the deliverance from sin and death achieved by Christ is so important to us that we devote a whole *season* of the church to its celebration.

A full seven weeks of feasting, seven times seven being the ancient representation of fullness, perfection, and completeness.

Now I can tell you all about the importance of this Easter feasting and the way we give it ceremonial expression—

white vestments, baptisms, holy water in the font, Paschal candle, Alleluias, no confession, standing as the redeemed before God—

I can go into all of this until I'm blue in the face.

But as the old saw goes, "If you understand, no explanation is necessary.

If you don't understand, no explanation is possible."

Or to go back to the quote from John Stuart Mill,

"There are many truths of which the full meaning cannot be realized until personal experience has brought it home."

Which explains why, I think, every year, no matter what the lectionary cycle is, in the second week of Easter we hear the story of Thomas' encounter with the risen Jesus. Right after we hear the story of the big event itself, we hear someone question it, someone who didn't experience it first-hand.

"Oh no, there's no way that happened. I'll never believe it until I see it for myself."

I think this is a very deliberate juxtaposition on the part of the framers of the lectionary, and I think it's genius.

How true to life is this for you?

You're sitting at a table in the lunchroom at work and a small group of people began talking about some movie.

One person in the group hasn't yet seen this particular cultural phenomenon.

No matter what glowing descriptive terms are used, the holdout continues to be skeptical.

At some point she is told, "You just have to be there!"

Ever been in a situation like that?

Sometimes it seems that all the hype and hoopla about popular films and even best-selling books just make us hesitant and doubtful about seeing or reading them. Perhaps we fear we'll be let down when we find the reality to be less interesting than the publicity has led us to believe. There are just some things that don't lend themselves well to third person accounts. Sometimes we can be persuaded; at other times we must experience for ourselves.

At the same time as we are skeptical, there's a consistent yearning in most people for powerful experiences. Just look at a current TV schedule. Programs like EyeWitness, 20/20, Real TV, and Rescue 911 are common. Thousands pack concerts that pummel the senses. We pay big bucks to be "moved." Being "entertained" isn't enough; we have to be "touched" in some magical way that leaves an impact on our senses. We want to be carried away by the crowd, lost in the music, shocked by violence or graphic language or behavior. We crave salsa that makes us sweat, speed that is breathtaking, sex that sweeps us away, humor that makes us laugh until we cry. An ordinary, mundane experience no longer has any "pull" for us.

So we seek a created high. You know, virtual reality technology can be as addictive as any narcotic. It's not hard to see why. For a child left on his or her own for hours at a time, the thrills of a video game hold far more appeal, for instance, than a book. The stimulation, the sensual impact is so much easier to achieve. There's no third person effect. The player is plunged immediately into graphic, intense action. And the impact is even greater when it is shared with others. Only a player can understand another player's excitement. If one of the group hasn't got the newest version of the game, it creates an instant barrier.

Sports fans are another example of the need for instant, intense excitement. Can't you just see a bunch of twenty-something guys sitting around talking, and suddenly whoever the sports mega-hero of the moment is standing there in the same room with them? Pretty intense for them. But now try to imagine them attempting to explain the incident later to an absent buddy. "Man, I'm *telling* you, he was really *here*. He sat right here at this table and drank *beer* with us. It was totally awesome. What do you mean, you don't believe us? We saw it with our own eyes!"

It's not too hard to visualize some doubt on the part of a modern day Thomas. Some things just need personal experience before the full meaning can take effect. Thomas was aching for just such an experience, to know that God had vindicated Jesus with a show of unimaginable power. But he just couldn't bring himself to believe something he hadn't seen. It wasn't that Thomas doubted his friends' honesty, or doubted the power that Jesus had. Thomas' principal characteristic really isn't doubt: it's pragmatism. Thomas just wasn't there, to see, to touch, to experience for himself. As today's Gospel reads, "Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."

What a tragedy that absence was. A life-shaping moment occurred, and Thomas wasn't there to experience it with the tightly-knit band of which he was a part. In his book *A Community of Character*, theologian Stanley Hauerwas cites a prime example of the power of shared experience. Pointing to the development of the community of rabbits in Richard Adams' timeless book, *Watership Down*, Hauerwas says that "what we seek is not power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common sense of adventure." He continues, "Indeed, our dignity derives exactly from our sense of having played a part in such a story."

In the story of *Watership Down*, it is the shared adventures of the rabbits that create the bond of community. In the Christian story, it is the experience of being with Jesus that draws his followers together. Thomas, by his absence, misses a piece of the adventure. And Thomas, no doubt (pardon the pun), felt distanced from his community because something incredible had happened which the others had experienced and he had not.

Now, we don't know why Thomas wasn't there. Maybe he had a very good reason; maybe it was a day when he just wanted to be alone. But whatever the reason, Thomas was absent from the band of Jesus' followers. He just wasn't there. It's interesting to speculate about how the story might have been different if Thomas had not been with the community when they *next* gathered. Or the next time, or the time after that. Communities are living entities that respond to change by protecting themselves. When a living thing is wounded, when a piece of the whole is removed, that living thing begins to seal its wound in order to begin the healing process.

If the missing part of the whole is *recovered* and grafted back on very quickly, it may be re-incorporated and resume its place and function. But the longer it is disconnected from the whole, the less likely it is to survive the re-incorporation.

What I'm trying to say is that we, like the gathered followers of the crucified and newly risen Jesus, are a community based on shared participation in the greatest of adventures. Week by week, Christ comes and stands among us. Week by week we break bread with him. We gathered followers share the stories of the ongoing adventure, bind each others' wounds, lift each others' hearts. Together. We each play our part in the story, and in so doing we testify to the truth, give it reality; its fullest meaning becomes evident in our midst, in our common experience.

If we expect others to believe us, to eagerly join us on this adventure, we've got to find a way to help *them* experience the presence of God in our midst. Our worship and our fellowship need to be open in order to experience the full power of God-in-community. Our excitement when we describe the support of this community must be at least equal to the excitement we express after seeing a good media event! We need to say: Come with us, be part of the whole with us, experience this life-shaping truth with us until its full meaning dawns in your heart too. Your absence would be a tragedy.

God, in Christ, has created a community that allows us to derive not only our dignity but our very lives from our sense of the part we play in the adventure of continuing creation and salvation. We celebrate this reality not only for the seven weeks of Easter but all year round. What an experience!

You just have to be here!