

## Easter II

***But Thomas said to them, ' 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.'*** John 20:24

Most of us can see ourselves as Thomas, I imagine. He missed out on Jesus' first appearance to the male disciples, so he's behind the curve. He feels left out, disadvantaged, and that never puts anyone in a good mood. And then, he's a guy with a practical mind, evidently. He's a concrete thinker. When Jesus does appear to him, he want something *substantial*. He wants to touch. He wants the evidence of his own hands that this presence is Jesus, his Jesus, somebody real.

Thomas is known, of course, most commonly as Doubting Thomas. And as such, as a doubter, he is a welcome exemplar to many of us who struggle with questions of doctrine and dogma, of creeds and certitudes. But he is also called, more charitably, Honest Thomas, and for that, I think, we can not only welcome, but admire him. He not only thinks, but says aloud, *who is this guy? How can I believe him? Nothing in my life has prepared me for a resurrection. What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to feel? Convince me!*

Well, Thomas *is* convinced. He puts his hands in the wounds, and he believes. He confesses, *My Lord, and my God!* That's his creed. He has signed up for the next perilous and unimaginable passage: life with the resurrected Christ.

When I've thought about Thomas in the past, I've assumed that he feels *better* after the tangible proof Jesus gives him. He believes. He feels more certain, more comfortable. Or does he? Is it perhaps more likely that he find this "evidence" unsettling, disturbing, indeed, life shattering. It's one thing to have your leader, a revolutionary, executed as a result of his provocative activities. Sad, but predictable, but an occupational hazard.

But what about this resurrection business? Is this a development, truly, to put minds and hearts at ease? Or does it throw everything into question?

My husband Sam was up in Maine, away from newspapers, over the weekend when the media chatter about Barack Obama's minister, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, heated up. When Sam got back he asked me what was going on. "Well, " I said, "

Reverend Wright has said a lot of things about America that are undoubtedly true, “ and a lot of people have gotten angry.”

How’s that for compression? In truth, I could say more about this situation, about Reverend Wright and Barack Obama and race in America than I have room for in this sermon or any ten sermons. But I want to make a few points today, because all this is very much in my mind and on my heart.

First, about the preaching. Various people have made the point, over the years, that the hour of Sunday morning church is the most segregated hour in America. I think that’s true; it’s an unhappy truth, a scandalous truth, a sinful truth, but it’s our truth, and it has certain corollaries.

One consequence – and this is a general reality, race aside, but point worth remembering– is that every preacher has a particular congregation to preach to – a particular audience. If we have integrity, discernment, and faithfulness we preach what we believe our own people need to hear. Sometimes that message is one of comfort and compassion. Our people are mourning and they need to be consoled, they need to lament. Sometimes that message is one of chastisement. Our people seem to us to be going down a wrong road, not following the teachings and principles of our faith, not treating one another well, and they need to be reproached and called to account. Sometimes, we preach motivation. Our people need to be inspired, to be fired up, to be aroused with holy fire.

And sometimes they need to be made angry. Because anger is a great energizer. Anger, used constructively, can change our lives, can change the world. Just look at Jesus. Anger was clearly one of his human emotions, and anger was a tool of his revolutionary power.

Reverend Wright has undoubtedly preached to arouse anger in his own people, to remind them of the systemic wrongs perpetrated upon them, to provoke them to action in their own behalf. And his charges against America, white America, when circulated beyond his particular congregation, have indeed made many people uncomfortable and unhappy, as well as angry. Those charges, when exposed to the wider world, have tapped deep wells of fear and racism. Are his remarks any more incendiary that what Jerry Falwell has preached, or James Dobson, or Fred Phelps, or any number of white racist preachers whose names I’m fortunate enough not to have encountered? I don’t think so.

Is he being judged by a different standard? In the media? By politicians? By white America generally? I think so. And that, my friends, is white racism.

Now to Barack Obama. What has he done in his speech about race and America? Well, first, let me say I think he's made a statement that will go down in history. To me he's taken one of the most astonishing, courageous, and straightforward actions of any politician in my lifetime. And remember, I came of political age in the 1960's, when there was plenty of action. But this speech is extraordinary. What he does is to identify the source of that anger, the profound cultural pain that has been passed from generation to generation of Blacks in our country. And he talks of the pain and anger that afflict white Americans as well.

Obama uses religious language, theological language. He talks about our country's *original sin* of slavery, how that sin was embedded in our constitution. He talks about the accomplishments we have made in terms of abolishing slavery and legal discrimination, but he points out that our country is not yet perfected. We are not yet *perfected*. That's the language of religion, the language of sanctification.

The pundits have been busy dissecting this speech, its motivation, and what it may or many not have accomplished. I'm sure we've all read lots of analysis and I'm not going to rehearse it all. But it's worth remembering what Obama could have done, and what many lesser people would have done. He could have ignored the whole brouhaha and hoped it would die down in a couple of news cycles. He could have trashed his preacher, his longtime minister and spiritual guide, as a casualty of politics. He could have pandered to Black Americans or to White.

Instead, I believe, he called us to account. All of us. Equally. He talked seriously, and complexly, and at length. He took pains to acknowledge various dimensions of Reverend Wright and of their relationship, describing the ambiguities most of us discover, eventually, in our connections with our spiritual guides and mentors. He confessed to discomfort at his white grandmother's knee-jerk racial fears. He tried to illuminate those dark places in all our hearts where grievance and prejudice grow and flourish.

Much of the commentary I've read suggests that Obama made this speech at great political cost. He knocked himself off his own pedestal, if you will, as far as many people are concerned. People – and their name may be legion – who have been attracted to him because of his message of “transcendence” will perhaps be turned off and turned away. Those who inferred or who would like to believe that we, as a nation, are entering a post-racial era, that with Obama's candidacy we can move beyond, by sailing over, the abyss, will perhaps see his speech as a setback.

And then there are other views. Myself, I feel about Obama after his speech as I like to imagine Thomas may have felt after he'd touched Jesus' wounds. I liked Obama before, I was very interested in his candidacy, I was able to feel an idealism about him – or at least, the *possibility* of an idealism about him, that I had not mustered up for any national politician in a long time. I thought he was someone who might renew my hope. But I wasn't sure. I didn't have enough information.

Sam and I went to hear Obama speak back in December. He gave a good speech but not a great one, he was not particularly on fire, and I didn't feel the magic I'd heard and read about. I found myself reassured by his voice – that it was deep and resonant and mature. But a voice is an accident of genes, not a guarantee of complexity of mind or profundity of spirit. A voice is not enough on which to hang the near term fate of our nation. I wanted some substance. Like Doubting, Honest, Thomas, I wanted something to put my finger on, to touch, to feel.

And now I have it. I have the substance. I don't know what will happen to Barack Obama politically as a result of this speech, or as a result of any of the other vagaries of political campaigning. But I cannot see how anyone who wondered whether the man has substance can continue to ask that question. If anything, he may prove to have *too much* substance for American life and politics, too much honesty, too much courage. We may not be willing to go where he seems to want to lead us.

Obama exposed to open air, for those who had ears to hear and eyes to see, the festering wound that is race, and racism, in America. He put his hand into the mark of the nails of America's wounded racial history. He named the scars, he did his best to describe some of the fears and resentments on both sides of the racial divide, and by this act, I believe and hope, he invited America to move, not *up and over* this charged and dangerous subject, this broken relationship, but *into it and through it*.

My suspicion about this speech is that it is going to expose another division in our society, this one not along racial lines at all. I think we're going to see – indeed, we are already seeing – a fault line between those who are eager and willing to take on the fraught issues of race and racism and struggle with them openly and with integrity and faithfulness, and those who are not.

On the topic of a national conversation about race, the conservative commentator William Kristol says, "Let's Not and Say We Did." Now I know he doesn't write his own

headlines, but that is the burden of his theme. And many will agree with him.

“It’s not an easy subject for black people or white people,” said Ira Berlin, a historian at the University of Maryland who writes on slavery. “As Obama indicated, there are lots of legitimate hurts on both sides. It is extremely easy for people to misspeak. In part because we don’t speak a lot and because we don’t speak a lot you don’t understand the language. People don’t understand where the land mines are. They sometimes use the wrong words or are condescending or seem to be condescending when they’re trying to be honest. It’s easy for people to take offense when the wrong language is used, particularly when they’ve got within them a lot of anger and are looking for someone to beat with a small stick. In those circumstances, it’s often better to say nothing.”

*Better? I wonder. Or safer? I’m on the diversity committee of an organization I belong to, and in the talk about diversity work or cultural competence we hear over and over about making “ a safe space” for people to be comfortable talking about race. Recently in one of these conversations I burst out and said, “I don’t want to be comfortable. I don’t see how we can do this work and be comfortable. And I think what people mostly mean by this is that white people need to be made comfortable, and is that really the point? We are comfortable, relatively speaking. Comfort is not motivating.”*

Race and racism, squarely confronted, are not comfortable or comforting. In response to Obama’s speech, Reverend John H. Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, said, "We might like to think that racism is a thing of the past. But on the gritty streets of Chicago's South Side where Reverend Wright’s Trinity Church has planted itself, race continues to play favorites in failing urban school systems, unresponsive health-care systems, crumbling infrastructure and meager economic development." (*Washington Post*, 3.22)

And Jim Wallis, the white evangelical activist, wrote a letter to faith leaders that defended the black church's "prophetic truth-telling" role, and said some whites might be in denial about the anger felt by many black Americans. "In 2008, to still not comprehend or seek to understand the reality of black frustration and anger, is to be in a state of white denial, which, very sadly, is where many white Americans are," said Wallis. (*Washington Post*, 3.22)

Earlier I said about Thomas, *When I've thought about Thomas in the past, I've assumed that he feels better after the tangible proof Jesus gives him. He believes. He feels more certain, more comfortable. Or does he? Is it perhaps more likely that he find this "evidence" unsettling, disturbing, indeed, life shattering?*

Or is it possible that he felt both sets of feelings at once? Did his reaffirmed faith, in Jesus, *that blessed assurance*, as the Gospel hymn calls it, present him with a challenge he could not ignore, could not deny, a call from which he could not turn away? Thomas did not turn out to be a shirker, after all. According to legend, he traveled east to convert India to Christianity.

And what about us? I mean us, here at St John's in the Easter Season of 2008? Can we put our own hands into the wounds of our society's fear and anger about race? Can we touch? Do we dare? Can we believe that touching those wounds will heal us? Will bring us, as Jesus promises, life?

Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.