

SERMON FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER 2010

Sister Mary Ann Wiesemann-Mills, OP, tells this familiar story of parenthood:

Little Robert had been put to bed.

The nightlight in his room did not do much to dispel the darkness.

Rather it heightened and emphasized the shadows of the darkness.

As four-year-olds are in the habit of doing, he first called for a drink of water.

Then he had to go to the bathroom.

When he called a third time to ask for one of his parents to come into the room with him, his mother called back to him: "Go to sleep. You will be all right. God is with you, taking care of you."

After a short silence came the reply, "Yes, but I want someone with skin on."

I think that the story of Robert speaks to what Thomas wanted, the reason Roman Catholics cling to the flesh of one who represents Christ on this earth in the institution of the papacy, and also the grief of all who mourn the passing of the warm flesh of a loved one.

Helping us see all this from the perspective of the apostle Thomas, Sarah Dylan writes: "the biggest mistake Thomas makes is in thinking that the body he wants and needs to touch, the body of the risen Christ, is the body that had been nailed to the cross." This is the only body that he knew. He had not experienced the Risen Christ, or at least he perceived that he had not."

Unlike the other disciples who were hiding in fear of execution themselves, Thomas was already out in the world. Perhaps Thomas was precisely where Jesus wanted him to be. If Thomas was out in the world, he didn't need to hear Jesus' commission to the others because he was already doing it.

Very powerfully Sarah asks: "*Do you need to know that God is real? Do you need to know that Christ is alive, that sin and death itself are not the last word, but are passing away? Do you need to experience Christ's presence? Do you want to touch Jesus, and KNOW that Jesus is really right there with you? Then hear Jesus' commission to those upon whom he breathes his spirit: you are being sent out, into the world, and specifically to the world's brokenness. You are being sent to touch those places, to proclaim and participate in the reconciliation and healing that is Christ's work in the world.*"

You are being sent because all of us--each one of us about to gather at our Lord's table -- are now the Body of Christ, Jesus' presence at work in the world, called and empowered to do what he did, and more.

“If we want to know that, if we want to experience that, we'll have to leave the rooms we lock ourselves in because of fear. We need to do what Thomas did -- get out into the world, and insist upon touching Christ's wounds. What can one person do? I don't know. But I know what Jesus can do. We can read about the signs of Jesus' power and how Jesus used that power in the Bible. But these signs were recorded not to provide us with something to read as we wait in locked rooms and gated communities, but to inspire us to experience the life of the risen Christ by living as Christ's Body in the world, touching, loving, healing, forgiving in Christ's name and to Christ's glory.”

It is difficult to see God's aim toward beauty and wholeness when we directly face our mortality, experience the after effects of chemotherapy, raise children as a single parent following a messy divorce, or visit our parents suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Some years ago, my mother and I discontinued antibiotics for my father as he suffered with Parkinson's Disease. When my mother was in the very early stages of Alzheimer's, she made her wishes known in a living will, a power of attorney for health care and a power of attorney for her finances. In the moment when her window of consciousness closed, I took consolation and found peace in light of God's ever-present passion for wholeness, beauty, and my mom's transformation. She was able to have this transformation when she could live in community where she was no longer alone to face the fears of her increasing dementia and know the peace of Christ together with others.

Luke Bouman writes that the reality of most people in the world today, certainly in the western world, is that we are people very much like the image we have of Thomas. Even his perceived language permeates our culture. “You have to see this to believe it.” We tend to live in a time when we do not even trust things that we see.... It might be better to say that we see only those things that we want to see. Everything else is in question. And in our

world, where we have learned not to trust our leaders and politicians, CEOs and corporations, we also know that even within families, the truth is sometimes far from the words that we hear or say or the things that we see. We have learned that those who do not carry healthy skepticism are betrayed by their political leaders, misled in their investments by the corporate world, refuse to believe that their children could be a problem at school, and then blame the teachers for failing grades. While doubt is not all bad, we are called by God to believe.

In the sphere of faith, where doubt is cast as the “enemy,” how do we then proceed? How do we make a bold proclamation in the face of a world in which every truth seems relative? What can we know? How can we be certain? Perhaps it is just this slavery to certainty in our culture that is our downfall.

What we begin to know when we, like Thomas, have doubts or cling to what we think we know, is that our minds cannot begin to imagine all of the things that God is about. Certainly Thomas could not imagine the resurrection, nor can we. When left to my own thoughts, do I imagine that God could possibly love someone like me, let alone forgive me? There are many times when I cannot imagine that I have anything that God could use. At times I think of how small I really am, one of six billion people on a tiny speck of a planet in an immense and diverse universe. How can I make any difference?

Nevertheless, when we imagine that even doubt can be a gift from God, then we may, at last, be open to faith at its deeper levels. Then we may allow the risen Lord to come to us. If we will just listen, he may open our heart and drive out the fear. He may breathe into us the Holy Spirit and send us into the world. Our God is a God who allows doubt and faith to coexist within us, perhaps most of all because we are allowed to see God in Christ: human and divine, both with us and transcendent, dead and risen, and present in ordinary bread and wine. Our doubts would keep God safely tucked away in the places where we can understand and control. The Easter event, if nothing else, shows us that no box, not even that of death can contain the wondrous love of our God.