

CSI: Jerusalem

I have two friends who are hooked on the TV show “Law and Order.” The first half of the show has old fashioned police work, followed in the second half with courtroom drama. If you have to be hooked on a show, this is a good one because it is likely to be on all the time on one channel or another. But there is another genre of crime shows which focus more on the forensic evidence. Scientists want details. There are the so called reality shows like “Forensic Files” and also fictional shows such as “CSI: Criminal Intent,” or its spin offs, “CSI: Miami”, and “CSI: New York.” These shows have become so popular that there is even a debate about whether there is such a thing as a “CSI effect,” in which juries expect scientific proof at every trial, and where colleges are filling up with courses in forensic science.

If I had to choose, from what is known in the Gospels, I think the disciple Thomas might be more of a CSI fan. He was a pragmatic guy, one who asks questions, one who wants proof before he believes. The scripture lesson we read today puts Thomas in the picture exactly one week after Easter, and here we are one week after our Easter celebration of the resurrection. What would a skeptical Thomas find as he enters the scene in Jerusalem? First of all, how are the disciples acting? Secondly, how does Jesus intervene? Thirdly, how does Thomas respond on the Sunday after Easter?

First of all, let us recall the story and see how the disciples are responding. It's Easter morning, and the tomb is empty. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, and she goes to tell the disciples that the Lord is risen. They gather in a locked room in Jerusalem, and Jesus suddenly appears to them. He greets them with peace, and then sends them out to do his work, the same way the Father sent Jesus. For some reason, Thomas is not there, and when he returns, he does not believe they saw Jesus, and demands to see for himself. Now it is exactly one week later, and Thomas is no more convinced than he was on Easter night. And why should he be? It is one week later and his fellow disciples are acting as if the resurrection had never happened. They are still in Jerusalem, still in the same room, and still hiding behind locked doors. If Thomas had to be convinced by the evidence of what the disciples are doing in response to Easter morning, it is not too impressive.

Back at Westminster, along with our newly opened sanctuary, we have a new web site design. It has all kinds of new features, and can even have a personalized profile, kind of like a My Space page. You will hear more about it in the coming weeks, and can even take a Sunday school class over the next few weeks to learn more about it. I like it because the first thing you see when you open the page is a short paragraph about who we are with a description of our congregation. One of the lines I like in that welcome describes us as a “caring, inclusive, family of faith. I think that is a good way to describe us. Now if the disciples had a website, at this point in the story, or if they put a banner outside the room they were hiding in, author Tom Long says that they would have to describe

themselves as “The church of sweaty palms and shaky knees, and with a firmly bolted front door.” There doesn’t seem to be much evidence in their behavior that the resurrection even occurred. If they act no differently the week after Easter, then why should Thomas believe them?

A second aspect of the gospel account is to look at how Jesus responds to this situation. Luckily, for Thomas (and for us) the Lord doesn’t take no for an answer. Although the door is locked tight, Jesus still appears among them one week after the resurrection. What is his reaction to this pathetic showing on the part of his disciples? How does he react to Thomas’ refusal to believe without proof? You would think he might be upset with the other disciples. On Easter night when he arrived he told the disciples to go and spread the good news. “As my Father has sent me, so I send you.” The disciples have hesitated.

Thomas has gotten a kind of a bad rap over the years. He is often spoken of as “Doubting Thomas.” But Thomas is not any more doubting than the rest of the disciples. But Jesus does not come to scold Thomas. There is no “Thomas bashing” in this account. In fact, Jesus is not intolerant of any of their doubts. He enters in spite of their hesitation, and offers his blessing. “Peace be with you!”

In 2007, we saw the shocking release of a book of letters written by Mother Theresa, a woman adored in India and around the world. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, preached the love and forgiveness of Jesus her whole life, and gave that life to serving the poorest of the poor. When the letters were published, we saw a picture of her last 40 years in which she described her faith with such words as “dryness,” “darkness,” and “loneliness.” Before her death, she begged that these letters which showed her doubt be destroyed. So who would have the nerve to dig them up and publish them? It was actually the Roman Catholic Church, which had overruled her request to destroy the letters. In fact, the book was edited by Rev. Brian Kolodiejchuk, the man who was given the job of collecting evidence in favor of making Mother Theresa a Roman Catholic saint. Why would they do this? It was because the church recognized that times of doubt are part of any life of faith.

Doubts and debates and questions continue, and Westminster is one of those places you can feel safe asking a question. Last week’s cover of Newsweek magazine had a cover article which lamented “The Decline and Fall of Christian America.” When I picked up the new issue yesterday, one of the first articles was touting a book with the exact opposite premise entitled God is Back! USA Today has had a couple of weeks of editorial comment about whether or not we need or are able to prove that the Bible is true. I can remember when I went to college with doubts about my faith, and with a lot of questions. It was such a relief to realize that Christians in all times and places have had doubts and questions. I learned a difference between doubt and unbelief. With doubt you are asking questions, and seeking answers, and still wrestling with your faith. If you are an unbeliever, on the other hand, you live a life that is centered on the self, and in which questions of God do not even arise.

Why are doubts and questions OK? It is because neither closed and locked doors nor closed and locked hearts can stop Jesus from reaching out to us in love. Jesus does not leave Thomas in the lurch because he wasn't there on Easter night. Instead he comes with a greeting of peace, and with his hands out stretched. Theologian, Paul Tillich says that with faith, we may not understand....but we are understood. We may not be able to fully grasp everything about our faith....but we are grasped. Maybe the first line of a hymn from the 1800's puts it more simply. "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go."

So finally, what is Thomas' response to this appearance of Jesus? Remember, Thomas is a pragmatist. Thomas is our CSI guy. There are two other places in John which feature Thomas. In one, Jesus insists on going to the dangerous territory near Bethany, and Thomas pretty much just throws up his hands and says, "Let us also go so that we may die with him!" The second incident occurs during Jesus' discourses at the Last Supper. Jesus has been talking on and on, trying to get them to understand what is about to happen, but the gospel makes it clear that they did not know what Jesus was talking about. He uses phrases like "clean feet," and "slave and Master," "I AM WHO I AM," and "son of Man," "my Father's house," and "where I am going." It is the pragmatic Thomas who finally stops Jesus and lets him know they don't know what he is talking about. "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" It is kind of like when the entire class at school is confused, and finally that one brave kid raises his hand to ask what the teacher is talking about.

In the Greek language, Thomas' asking for proof is more harsh in the Greek than it is translated in our Bible. What he really says is, "Unless I can thrust my hands," or "Unless I can really shove my hands," into Jesus' wounds, he will not believe. Jesus says, "OK, Thomas. Reach out your hand. Stop your doubting and believe!" BUT...the Bible doesn't tell us that Thomas did so. In the presence of Jesus, all that CSI stuff falls to the wayside. The practical Thomas is overwhelmed by the peace and love offered by the resurrected Christ. He falls on his knees. In fact, Thomas is the only person in any gospel to truly recognize who Jesus is. People have called Jesus "Lord," but it is only Thomas who recognizes that he is in God's presence and cries out, "My Lord, and my God!"

So, it is exactly one week after Easter morning for both the disciples and us. The disciples are still hiding behind closed doors. Not much is changed in them by hearing the good news of the resurrection. We may not be as fearful as them, but what shows the world that we have heard the good news in the past week? Has anything changed with us? Luckily, even when our response is less than perfect, the Lord does not give up on us. Not when faced with closed and locked doors, or even closed and locked hearts. In spite of the inactivity on the part of the disciples, in spite of their not going out to do his work as they were told to do on Easter, Jesus persists. He comes with a greeting of peace, and with arms opened wide.

In the end, for Thomas and for us, what matters is our reaction when Jesus goes the extra mile and reaches out to us over and over again. Dr. Martin Luther

King, Jr., says, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” We may falter like the father in Mark’s gospel who says to Jesus, “I believe, Lord! Help my unbelief!” Maybe we will be more like Thomas who is able to give his whole self and proclaim, “My Lord, and my God.” If the CSI team came to your door and accused you of being a follower of the resurrected Christ, would they find enough evidence to convict you?

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