

“Thomas’s Encounter” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (4/16/2023, Second Sunday after Easter)

If I were to ask you what the hit mockumentary TV show *The Office* and the video game *Metal Gear Solid*, the 1998 classic for Playstation in which the protagonist, Solid Snake, must liberate hostages and stop a nuclear strike, have in common, it would be this: they both break the fourth wall.

This is when, in any storytelling medium, the characters or narrators turn to the audience and break the illusion that they are in a little storytelling box. And so in *The Office*, the characters constantly look directly into the camera. In *Metal Gear Solid*, one of the bosses, who is supposedly psychic, “makes” the controller of the player at home move across the floor.

Breaking the fourth wall can be funny, it can provide further commentary on the story, or, in some cases, it can be used for dramatic effect. And it can create a sense of intimacy and urgency as well.

John the Evangelist has broken the fourth wall in our Gospel reading for today. He explains why he has been artfully telling stories of Jesus throughout his Gospel, but especially why he is telling us this particular story, the story of so-called “doubting” Thomas, a story that is always appointed for the second Sunday of Easter.

And what is that story? Sunday evening, the same evening of Easter Day. The doors of the house are locked. Though the story of the Resurrection has spread to the disciples from Mary Magdalene and other women by this point, they are still terrified.

Jesus shows up and offers them Peace, twice. He sends them out on mission; he breathes on them the gift of the Spirit; and he gives them apostolic authority.

Thomas isn’t present for this exchange, and he doesn’t automatically take the word of the others. He wants a personal touch; he wants to see Jesus for himself.

Jesus comes to see Thomas a week later, offering him the Peace of God, and the gift of his Presence. And in that gift, Thomas finds faith.

Jesus himself at this point almost breaks the fourth wall, turning toward us as he says "blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." *WINK* (That's me and you)

But in case there was any doubt, John breaks the fourth wall fully, turning to us and saying: "These [stories] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Now, that is definitely you. And me. It is us. We are the ones to whom John is speaking. There is a transmission of faith here that is really quite amazing.

From Thomas, to us, through the voice of the Evangelist John. Our belief is the same as Thomas's belief. We are connected to him in quite a mystical and wonderful way.

I must confess. One of the greatest joys of preaching is that moment when we, too, as preachers, break the fourth wall. Perhaps up until that point in the liturgy what we are doing is ritualized. Properly so. There is a formality and grace to what we are doing in the liturgy. We are joining ourselves to the Christian tradition of the past 2,000 years when we ask for God's presence, when we ask for God's forgiveness, when we read and hear God's word, when we celebrate the Eucharist.

But preaching breaks the fourth wall, too. We communicate with each other face to face. We let down our guard. We create a "wound," a moment of vulnerability, a moment in which we can touch Jesus, a moment in which we can turn to each other and say: "hear this story! Hear it in a hopefully new way. Hear it in a way that lets you know that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, and that through God's gift of faith, you have life in his name!"

And so as we share these moments of vulnerability, of openness, of encounter with the Risen Christ, today, I just want to share two things with you.

The first is Thomas's confession of faith, and a request.

Please don't fall into the trap of seeing doubt and belief as opposites.

This is what I'll call the "God's Not Dead" version of Christianity. Some of you know the film?

The idea here, and in much of the West for the past 300 years, is that the way to faith is through arguments for God's existence, or evidence that the claims of the Bible are completely true in one particular way; that if you could just pile up enough "pros" on the "pro/con"

list of faith that you would be set.

I would venture to guess that if you wrote a “pro/con” list of whether or not you should love your children, or your spouse, or your parents, however, you’d understand why this is not the way.

Faith, Hope, and Love, can’t be reduced to this false dichotomy. Faith or doubt. Belief or disbelief.

We have turned the mysteries, deep mysteries at the heart of Christianity, into merely a matter of whether or not I can make some kind of intellectual “Yes” or “No” to Christianity. Whether or not I can take out the manila folder marked “belief” and go through the documents and then sign the paperwork at the end; “yes,” I’ve decided this is worthy of my belief. Yes, I believe. Grab the notary public, stamp the document, I’m done. I believe.

One of the worst things about this model of Christianity is that, just as easily as we can construct the building of our faith based on “evidence,” we can deconstruct that edifice when the evidence doesn’t support those claims anymore.

And so, for many believers today, I’m guessing for many of you, we go back and forth between doubt and belief, doubt and belief, adding confusion, disappointment, and religious trauma into the mix.

What if there were another way?

What if, as St Ambrose said, “God did not save his people through argument, since the Kingdom of God consists in simplicity of faith, not wordy contention”?

The heart of the Gospel is indeed faith, but faith is a gift from God, not something that results from a mathematical equation. Faith is nothing more—or less—than trust in the person of Jesus Christ. It is placing our trust in him and believing that he is worthy of that trust. It is an action of our entire being, heart, soul, mind, and strength, not merely an intellectual exercise.

Listen to Thomas again, in a fresher translation:

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my hand into his side, I will most certainly not have faith.”

And to Jesus’s reply:

“Bring your finger here and look at my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and cease to be faithless, but be faithful instead.”

“You have faith because you have seen me? How blissful those who do

not see and who have faith.”

In this translation, the theologian David Bentley Hart avoids the problematic language of “belief” that has been co-opted by a certain strand of Christianity.

Instead, he brings us back to the heart of the matter, the heart of the Gospel, the heart of Jesus, who gives Thomas the gift of faith, just as he gives us the gift of faith.

Thomas isn't doubtful. He isn't weighing a set of intellectual propositions and trying to land on the “pro” column. He's traumatized, he's incredulous; he wants to know that the Jesus standing before him is the same Jesus he'd been walking and talking with for the past three years. The same Jesus he just saw brutally tortured and crucified just a week and a half ago. The same Jesus whom he loves, and misses. Thomas desperately wants to believe what the disciples are telling him but it is simply too good to be true. Thomas doesn't trust this person until he knows it's Jesus, the trustworthy one. Thomas is not faced with an intellectual doubt, he is faced with an existential question. Who is the person standing before him? Who is the Risen Christ?

And so, when Thomas is given the gift of faith by Jesus, who invites him to touch and feel, who invites him to see and know, who invites him into this most intimate scene of encounter, he cannot help but say: You Are The One! You are MY Lord and MY God, or as one commentator puts it, Thomas is saying “Yes, it IS Jesus! And he is Divine!”

Not the God of my friends, not the God of my family, not the God of my Mind alone, you are the God of my Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength. You are the God of my entire Being. Yes, I will have doubts, I will have questions, I will waver and falter, but You will never cease to be My Lord and My God. You will rescue me and you will never abandon me.

My friends, ENCOUNTER is at the heart of our Faith.

And the wonderful thing about Thomas's story is that Jesus meets him exactly where he is, with no judgment, no harsh words, no chastising him for his lack of faith. Instead, he gives him the gift of encounter, a real encounter that for all of its immediacy is no less real than the encounters he has with each one of us.

We like to say in the Sacramental traditions that God gives us simple things through which we can, like Thomas, see, feel, hear, smell, and taste, through which we can experience God.

These things, thank God, are not dependent on us or our shifting moods and beliefs; they are the gifts of faith.

They are extraordinary means of grace using very ordinary and everyday things: water, oil, bread, wine. God wants to use all the things around us to communicate God's grace and love to us, especially since we no longer have the tangible and visible Jesus walking around.

I know that some of you might be thinking at this point: "What if I don't have faith today?" "What if I haven't had an encounter with Jesus lately, or ever?" "What if I'm just not feeling IT, whatever IT is, whatever I'm supposed to be feeling? What if I can't see Jesus, no matter how hard I try?"

"When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear . . . Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'"

I have Good News for you. Jesus will meet you where you are. Jesus can burst through the locked doors of your heart, doors that are locked because of fear, or indifference, or the wounds of past or present trauma. Jesus will meet you where you are, as he met Thomas, without judgment, with infinite kindness and mercy. Jesus will meet you where you are, with grace, and love, and forgiveness.

Our faith is alive and vibrant with wonder and mystery. We are invited, as Thomas was, to have an encounter with the Risen Christ, the one who is making all things new. In the two great Sacraments of the Church we celebrate this day, we see the signs and tokens of that new life. Cleansing, and refreshment, restoration and renewal, food and drink to strengthen our faith and strengthen our journey. Come to the waters, come to the table. Come and encounter Jesus. AMEN.