

Touching the Earth's Wounds
Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
April 23, 2017
Easter 2C 2017/Earth Sunday
John 20: 19-31

One of the things I learned in seminary that has stuck with me is that it's not fair to call Thomas, "Doubting Thomas." It would be much better to call him "Conditional Thomas" because he puts out a condition for his faith. "*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 this side, I will not believe."

And he follows through with it. When Jesus invites him to touch his wounds, he does not hold back. He doesn't say, "Oh that was just a bit of Semitic hyperbole. I didn't mean *literally* touch them." He goes right in.

So, I'd give a different nickname to Thomas. Maybe, "Who Does That Thomas" or "Over the Top Thomas" or "Ready for Medical School Thomas."

Or maybe just "Courageous Thomas", the one who boldly goes where others have not.

I notice that Jesus does not judge Thomas negatively. He encourages him. "Put your finger here in my hands. Reach out and put your hand in my side. Go right into the wounds."

And in that wound—in the intimacy, in the realness, in the flesh and the blood—Thomas comes to know something that changes his life. Something that leads him to make the boldest confession of faith in the Gospels: "My Lord and my *God*."

It's tempting to use Thomas as the example of the second-rate disciple—the one who needs some kind of proof, the one who doesn't have enough faith. But I think we might see him in a different light. What if this is actually a pattern for following Jesus? What if Thomas is the picture of what our discipleship looks like? What if we are being called to go into the wound, so that we can know the power of the Resurrection, so that we can receive the new life that comes to us *there*?

There are so many wounds around us—and in us—and among us. But today is Earth Sunday, so I would like to look at the woundedness of the earth. This may be a stretch for us but I wonder if we could see the woundedness of the earth as the wounds of Christ. Particularly, in Paul's letter to the Colossians, we get a picture of the Cosmic Christ—the one who fills all in all. So this whole planet is filled with Christ—we could even say it is the body of Christ. And today, that body has some very deep wounds.

Not many of us are like Thomas when it comes to looking at the wounds of the earth. We would rather not know how serious these wounds are.

This was brought home to me 3 years ago when I went back to where I grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida. I hadn't been there for 7 years and I loved reconnecting with people but also with the place. I'd forgotten the deep comfort of being somewhere that is virtually flat, where the light has a certain intensity and where you are never far from water.

But there was something that stunned me. I even asked my cousins who are home designers about it. “Is anybody here worried about climate change?”, I asked as politely as I could. The city is basically at sea level now and rising levels seem like such an obvious threat. At the time, the answer was “no”.

I couldn’t wrap my head around it. This is a beautiful city, surrounded by water on three sides that stands to lose a lot with climate change. You don’t even need to be self-less or other-centered to care about this. You can be completely self-interested, completely driven by self-preservation. And yet, virtually no one went into that wound.

I don’t know what it was that kept people—ordinary people and city leaders—from seeing the dangers of climate change. Some of it might be the inconvenience of it. It’s better not to know too much about it—it’s better not to get too deeply into it—because we might realize we need to make some changes in our own lifestyles. The life in Florida is generally very pleasurable—great weather, great pace of life. It’s easy to just enjoy the present without the intrusion of the gloomy cloud of climate change.

But I think there’s another level to this massive denial. Fear.

It takes courage to go into the wound of climate change—to see that the average temperature has already risen at an alarming rate—to understand that human beings are responsible for most of this change. It takes courage to see that the extreme weather we’re having is not just a fluke. Who really wants to hear that the oceans are absorbing a quarter of our carbon dioxide emissions—which changes makes the oceans more acidic and threatens the world’s coral reefs? And nobody wants to learn that if we continue on the path we’re on, by 2100 the sea level at Hampton Roads, Virginia will be 2.9 feet higher than it is today.

Going into the wound of climate change can be like getting a dire diagnosis—you long for the day *before* when you didn’t know. It’s actually not hard to understand why people who are otherwise caring don’t want to know anything about it.

But some people have no choice—because climate change is not only hurting plants, animals, the permafrost and coral reefs, it is already hurting people. And not just people in other countries. Last year, the U.S. recognized the need to relocate an entire community in Louisiana, Isle de Jean Charles. The people there are struggling with the impacts of climate change. They are native Americans who have hunted, fished, trapped and farmed the land for centuries. Since 1955, 90% of the original land has been washed away. The wounds in *this* place are deep.

It is hard to follow Thomas into these wounds.

But we do not go into these wounds on our own. The first thing Jesus does when he appears to the disciples is speak to their fear. He says “Peace be with you.” And then he gives them a source of ongoing courage and peace. He breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

I see the kind of faith that Thomas shows us as exactly what we need. A hands off kind of faith—a faith that says “God’s going to take care of this, I don’t need to do anything”—does not do the trick. It’s Thomas’s “No Holds Barred”, “All in” kind of faith that we need.

In Thomas's story, we can hear the good news that going into the wounds leads us to hope for the future *and* new ways of living now. If you go into this wound of climate change, you can see that what we do now—as individuals, as local communities, as a congregation, as a country—what we do now *will make a difference*. There is a wide range in the possible scenarios—it depends greatly on how much we limit carbon dioxide emissions now. I've noticed that the most hopeful people I know are the ones working directly on limiting climate change.

I had a small experience of that while working on this sermon. I read much more about climate change than I have in a long time—because, I have to admit, it overwhelms me, too. But by going deeper into this wound, I discovered a thrilling piece of new life.

My hometown of St. Petersburg—the place where 3 years ago it seemed like nobody had even heard of climate change—that very same place became the 20th city in the United States to commit to switching to 100% renewable energy. In November, the city council voted unanimously to take the funds they had received from BP—from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill—and use those funds to design a plan to move the entire city over to renewable energy. This makes so much sense in a town whose nickname is the Sunshine City. And for me, the picture of using the money from such a deep wound to the earth as the Deepwater oil spill to move a city to renewable energy is a magnificent expression of the Resurrection. The ugly wound of the oil spill is becoming the source of beautiful, healthy energy.

Resurrection that means new life for the whole earth.

May we believe and have life in Christ's name.

Amen