

To know him is to see him

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There is a richness and depth to this week's text from John's Gospel, fertile ground for reflection. Below are some assorted thoughts the story of Thomas inspires in me.

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When I was three, my mother found a cocoon on a bush. She brought the twig with the cocoon into the house and put it in a jar, careful to punch holes in the lid. "This is a cocoon" she explained. "It doesn't look like much now but if we wait long enough, it's going to turn into a butterfly!" I couldn't wait to see this miracle and I anxiously checked the progress of the cocoon every day. Nothing happened. After a time, my mother quietly disposed of the failed science experiment.

Later that year, we were on a walk and my mother noticed I was carrying a fistful of dead leaves. "Honey, put that down," she said. "It's messy." I looked up at her earnestly and said, "No mom. I'm going to take this home and put it in a jar with holes in the top, one day it's going to turn into a bird!"

My mother, a professor of child psychology, uses this story to illustrate how logic develops in young children. I hear it and think of the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Even in the face of contradictory evidence, I believed that my mother was a reliable witness.

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In John's Gospel, the only people who see the risen Christ are those who knew him in life. They recognize him not by how he looks, but by his words and his wounds. It makes you wonder if perhaps other people saw the resurrected Jesus but had no context for the encounter. We don't recognize people we don't know.

I think this is why I make my children go to church. I want them to get to know Jesus Christ well enough so they recognize the risen one when they encounter him in the world.

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The story of Thomas and Jesus leaves one question unanswered: does Thomas in fact put his finger in the holes and his hand in the side?

The NRSV tells us Thomas wanted to put his finger in the mark of the nails, but the Greek word for "put" actually suggests something more like "plunge" or "thrust." When Jesus appears the second time and offers Thomas the chance to get knuckle deep in the wounds, we don't know if he takes him up on the offer.

Given that Thomas went on to be one of the greatest evangelists, spreading the Christian faith as far as India, I have to assume he does. It makes sense as a source for his fervor.