

April 12, 2015, Second Sunday of Easter (John 20:19-31)

Thomas knows Jesus as incarnate. He cannot easily make the leap to Jesus' new condition. It's easier for us, because we consider the story in a different order.

by [Martha Spong](#) in the [April 1, 2015](#) issue

I used to have a Bernese mountain dog named Sam. He was a sweet dog but not very smart. This was never more apparent than the time he had an infected paw, and the veterinarian told me to soak it in an iodine solution. Sam was tall and weighed 125 pounds. His paws were the size of bread plates. He was obedient enough for normal purposes, good on the leash, but it's hard to make a dog understand why he needs to keep his paw in a dish of funny-looking water. Human-canine communication does not work at such a complex level. I did the best I could to soothe him, and he did the best he could to explain to me that standing in a dish of water was ridiculous.

I'm sure he doubted me, if dogs can doubt. And I understand why he did. I also understand why Thomas doubts the story his friends tell him, because it makes about as much sense as an iodine solution in a Tupperware bowl.

"We have seen the Lord," they say, a statement Thomas has every reason to question. He knows Jesus was crucified and buried. He must have heard the story that Mary Magdalene reported to Peter and the disciple we know as "the other" disciple or "the beloved" disciple—how they followed her to the tomb and found it empty, how she stayed and wept and saw a man she understood to be Jesus, not dead at all, but more than simply alive.

We don't know what he thinks of this story, but we do know what he says when he hears about Jesus wafting through a locked door: "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 his side, I will not believe." He wants to see the hands that washed his feet, the feet that walked

the roads with him.

Thomas knows Jesus as incarnate. He understands his humanity, his embodiment. He cannot easily make the leap to Jesus' new condition.

In a way it's easier for us, because we consider the story in a different order. The real wonder is God having hands and feet in the first place; the real wonder is God allowing human beings the power to nail those hands and feet to a cross. We start with the feet of little baby Jesus, with his tender and vulnerable humanity absolutely full of God-ness. When we believe this part of the story, the resurrection is a reasonable conclusion. Of course God who became human and died could then exist in another form!

I don't think this week's story is about Thomas's faith. It's about his perception. Thomas believes in Jesus, but Thomas doesn't think symbolically. In John 11 he is ready to go and die by Jesus' side. In chapter 14, he is the only disciple to admit he does not know the way to the place Jesus is going. He would like to have a literal road map for following Jesus. He rejects an impractical story.

We all understand things differently. Some of us get faith with our minds, and others feel it with our hearts. Thomas has to get there with his senses. He wants to see and touch, to really know in the way that works best for him. Artists have portrayed him with his finger tentatively probing the wound in Jesus' side, the risen Lord come back once more to show him the marks.

Blessed are those who have faith but have not seen. These are hard words. There are days I want to see the marks. I wonder what God wants from me and how I can be pleasing to God at times when the way is not clear. I wish I could see God's intentions as clearly as the disciples do, to hear Christ speak words of instruction. He comes right through the locked doors. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Is Jesus scolding Thomas? Some people think so. So much of how we understand Bible stories, especially the more widely told ones, depends on the tone in which we hear them. I don't think Jesus is dismissing Thomas, or us, when we want or need to see more. The good news of the incarnation is that Jesus has been like us. He knows both the beauties and the limitations of our human senses.

I like to hear Jesus' words this way, more kindly: "Better to be one who doesn't feel the limits. But Thomas, if you need to, put your hand here."

God must have to be awfully patient with us. Like a happy dog on a spring day, we stretch against the leash to get to the smell on that telephone pole, to read the message. Like a sad dog on a winter afternoon, we move a paw and knock over a dish of iodine and water, even though we didn't mean to do it. Like a pet owner who resorts to holding compresses on a wounded paw, God finds other means.

Yes, it's better to be the one who doesn't feel the limits. But we need not despair, for we worship a God who had a body and lets us see the marks of his love.