

Easter II
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I doubt that in the whole communion of saints there is a figure with whom we more readily identify than Thomas, the apostle whose skepticism in the presence of the risen Jesus has made him enduringly our icon of doubt. The situation is not without a degree of telling irony, for earlier, when Jesus was planning to return to Bethany despite the dangers it imposed, it was Thomas who, in a striking display of courageous confidence, announced to his fellow apostles, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." But despite his exemplary resolve here, it is as the icon of doubt that he endures in our minds, and the ease with which we identify with him offers a glimpse into the world of our own shadowy hesitations, the world in which the question "how can I be sure?" rolls off the tongue more quickly and more frequently than does "alleluia." And I suspect, truth be told, this realization doesn't sit all that well with us. We quickly latch on to Jesus's observation: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,*" yet in our hurry to regret our doubt, we seem to forget that upon seeing our doubt-riddled Thomas, Jesus greeted him with the gift of peace and unconditionally offered him the touch of his wounded side. Jesus does not say "poor, poor fellow, if we must do it this way then, I guess that's what we must do"; instead, he says "peace be with you," and

“give me your hand . . . place it here,” much as earlier he had revealed the wounds of his side to the other apostles.

If we focus only on the dynamics of doubt—Thomas’s disbelief and Jesus’s evidentiary response—we may miss the stunning fact that here Jesus so freely offers the intimacy of his wounded body: evidence to overcome doubt, certainly, but also nearness . . . perhaps even a place of rest. Devotion to the wounds of Jesus would later become a prominent part of late-medieval piety, and as Eamon Duffy explains, “*the side wound of Christ had a particular fascination and devotional power, for it gave access to his heart and therefore became a symbol of refuge in his love.*” In this vein, the fourteenth-century mystic, Julian of Norwich, reminds us that the side wound of Jesus was “*large enough for all mankind that shall be saved and rest in peace and in love.*”

Thomas, reach out your hand and put it in my side. Thomas, reach out your hand, put it in my side, see my heart, and rest in peace.

The moment of doubt—Thomas’s and our own—is perhaps then less a crisis of faith than the seedbed out of which a more intimate faith can grow, a faith nurtured by the drawing near of Jesus in tangible ways, a faith that dares to believe that God is profoundly in the unknown, a faith that dares to believe that “alleluia” is always, even if sometimes reluctantly, the answer, a faith that imagines that that which one dares to believe could be true.

The relationship of faith and imagination is a compelling one, for in the geography of the soul there will always be countries where Reason is a foreign tongue, areas of the soul where the poetic, creative, and imaginative utterance are particularly “at home” as gifts of grace. Because of the dual manifestations of his vocation, the Presbyterian cleric and novelist, Frederick Buechner, is well positioned to explore the inter-twinings of faith and imagination. He writes that

“In faith and fiction both, you fashion out of the raw stuff of your experience. If you want to remain open to the luck and grace of things anyway, you shape that stuff in the sense less of imposing a shape on it than of discovering the shape. And in both you feign—feigning as imagining, as making visible images for invisible things.”

“Making visible images for invisible things” of course, is a familiar echo of our understanding of “sacrament” itself. In the building of faith, the spirit-led imagination discovers the imagery that will function like a sacrament, investing the intangible with tangible form. Buechner continues, noting that faith is like worship because

“it is essentially a response to God and involves the emotions and the physical senses as well as the mind Faith is homesickness. Faith is a lump in the throat. Faith is less a position on than a movement toward, less a sure thing than a hunch. Faith is waiting. Faith is journeying through space and through time.”

The exercise of a spirit-led imagination is a gift of grace by no means exclusive to the poets and musicians or the novelists and artists, nor restricted to the arts themselves, though we remain grateful for the way artistic evocations of things intangible allow us better to grasp the spiritual realities that seem to elude us, especially when, like Thomas, we are under the sway of doubt. For those who have understood the music of the church in this sacramental way, I suspect the music of Bach has a special claim. The Church itself seems to agree, for in the last revision to the Calendar, Bach, along with Handel and Purcell, was given a “saintly” annual commemoration on July 28. How are we to understand his presence alongside the Biblical saints, the martyrs, the church fathers? (I can hear Augustine saying, “at last, the musicians are here, but please not too many.”) Can it be that through grace, many have heard in Bach’s music a tangible embodiment of those fleeting wisps of spiritual reality that help assuage our doubts? Bach’s own understanding of what he was doing suggests we may be on the right track. We can peel back the curtain on Bach’s understanding in several ways. His habitual use of the initials SDG and JJ in his manuscripts is a telling sign of intent and attitude: *Soli Deo Gloria* and *Jesu Juva—only for the glory of God and Jesus help me*. But a more revealing look behind the curtain emerges in his personal copy of a Bible commentary by Abraham Calov. In the margins of its pages, Bach has added a number of annotations in his own hand. Their extent unsurprisingly shows a figure well versed in Scripture and one actively engaged in its study. Additionally though, some of the remarks themselves convey a deep understanding of the nature of his calling, his vocation. In response to 2 Chronicles 5:13, a verse dealing with the music of the Temple, Bach writes:

NB Where there is devotional music, God with His grace is always present.

For Bach this was an understanding that would animate and sustain him in a career that was no stranger to frustration and vexation. But of more importance, it is an understanding that opens the door to a sacramental theology of church music. Through grace the tangible musical forms may draw us to the intangible presence of the holy.

Where there is devotional music, God with His grace is always present. In the vessels we have fashioned, and in the very act of fashioning them, God may with grace invite us to find His answer to the doubts that beset us. For that and for the creative voices among the saints, Thanks be to God.