

Thomas the Brave

Please echo this prayer -

O God who made the heart and ear,
we listen care'fly as you draw near,
to hear your word in many ways,
and live your life throughout our days. Amen.

Hear these words from the Gospel of John, chapter 20, verses 19-31.

This is a word from God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

I. Introduction

I've been thinking a lot about the heart.

One of my favorite essays was written by Brian Doyle for The American Scholar.

It's titled Joyas Voladoras, Flying Jewels, and is about hearts, specifically about the hearts of hummingbirds.

Did you know a hummingbird's heart is the size of a pencil eraser?

It beats ten times a second.

Hummingbirds visit a thousand flowers a day.

They dive at 60 miles per hour.

They can fly backwards.

They can fly 500 miles without resting.

Brian writes, "Hummingbirds, like all flying birds but more so, have incredible enormous immense ferocious metabolisms. To drive those metabolisms they have race-car hearts that eat oxygen at an eye-popping rate. Their hearts are built of thinner, leaner fibers than ours. Their arteries are stiffer and more taut. They have more mitochondria in their heart

muscles—anything to gulp more oxygen. Their hearts are stripped to the skin for the war against gravity and inertia, the mad search for food, the insane idea of flight.

The essay is also about the hearts of blue whales.

Did you know a blue whale has the biggest heart in the world?

It weighs more than 7 tons.

A first grader could walk around in it with her head held high, stooping a little only to go through its valves.

Brian writes, “There are perhaps ten thousand blue whales in the world, living in every ocean on earth, and of the largest animal who ever lived we know nearly nothing. But we know this: the animals with the largest hearts in the world generally travel in pairs, and their penetrating moaning cries, their piercing yearning tongue, can be heard underwater for miles and miles.”

Did you know that every creature on earth has about 2 billion heartbeats to give in a lifetime?

If you give them fast, like a hummingbird, you will live for only about 2 years. If you give them slowly, like a bowhead whale in the cold, cold waters of the Arctic Ocean, you will live for about 200 years.

Wow!

How amazing is the heart?

My favorite quote about the heart comes from Antoine de Sainte-Exupère. You may know him as the author of the classic book *The Little Prince*. The quote comes from that book.

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;” writes Saint-Exupéry, “what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

So today I want to preach about seeing what is essential with the eyes of the heart, and I want to do that in the light of the disciple Thomas’ heart found in our text.

I want to reclaim Thomas from the shadows of being called doubting Thomas and borrow a name for Thomas from Nadia Bolz-Weber, who names him Thomas the brave.

She says that our text today is her favorite text in the New Testament because she so deeply identifies with Thomas, because Thomas is so deeply human.

Indeed, it does take courage to be deeply human.

II. The Locked Heart

“...the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors because they were afraid...”
(John 20:19, GNT)

The disciples were gathered behind locked doors “because they were afraid.”

This becomes an image of the heart shut tight—guarded, defensive, unwilling to risk hope again after loss.

It’s a heart that has known trauma and is trying to survive by closing itself off.

Many of us know about that.

As I look with the eyes of my heart, I notice that Thomas hasn’t locked his heart with the other disciples.

Where is he?

What is he doing?

Is he out there, barefooted and open hearted, among people filled with hate, people injured, people afraid, people despairing, people in the shadows, people lost in sadness?

In my heart, I think so.

Thomas the brave and deeply feeling disciple.

I love this.

Tradition teaches us that Thomas would make his way to Kerala, India to live out the Jesus story, the gospel life.

After almost 2000 years, there are still St. Thomas Christians living out the Jesus story, living the gospel life in Kerala, India today.

I want to be brave and deeply sensitive like Thomas.

Let's take a moment and place ourselves in the locked room with the disciples.

If, like the disciples, we are afraid...If our hearts are locked like that room...the please remember Jesus is here, as he was there, able and willing to walk through the locked room, through the locked heart...to be with us and to breathe love, forgiveness, faith, hope, light, and joy into our hearts.

Let's remember that Jesus is here.

STORY

He sat on the edge of the park bench like he was waiting for a bus that'd already come and gone.

I noticed his hands first.

Folded tight. Knuckles pale. Like he was holding something inside them that might escape if he loosened his grip.

"Good morning," I said.

He nodded, but didn't look up.

We watched the same patch of sidewalk for a while. People passed by. A dog tugged its owner around the corner. A child laughed like the world'd never once broken her.

After a while, he said, very quietly, "You ever feel like... if you open up again, it might close you down for good?"

I let that sit between us.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think that’s what a locked heart sounds like from the inside.”

He gave a small laugh. Not happy. But not nothing either.

“I keep it shut now,” he said. “It’s safer that way.”

Just then, a breeze came through, soft, but insistent. It rustled the trees. It moved across his face like a question.

“Maybe,” I said, “but hearts aren’t made for safety.”

He looked down at his hands.

They had begun, almost without him noticing, to open.

III. The Wounded Heart

“Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25, GNT)

Thomas refuses secondhand faith.

He insists on touching the wounds of Christ—the nail marks and the pierced side.

This is the image of a heart that dares to name its doubt and pain.

It’s not cynical so much as wounded and longing for something real enough to trust again.

As I look with the eyes of my heart, I notice that Thomas has a wounded heart.

By that I mean this.

Listen to these words by Barbara Brown Taylor about Thomas.

“What if he needs to see for himself that the risen one is the same one who died,” she preaches, “Who has not come back all healed up and good as new but who has returned to his friends with visible evidence that he will never leave what is most human about him

behind?

If that's a possibility, then Thomas isn't looking for physical proof of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He is looking for existential proof that the one whom God has raised up is the same one who was damaged beyond all human repair. He is looking for evidence that this Messiah knows

everything there is to know about the worst kind of breathlessness and will never discount it, neither here nor in the hereafter. Otherwise, what should Thomas believe? That Jesus' new life in God has nothing to do with his old one? That faith means seeing the wounded world as a passing illusion?

Thomas wasn't having it. He wanted to see the marks on Jesus' body. He wanted to reach out his real hand and touch Jesus' real wounds. Only then would he believe that it mattered, that Jesus' resurrected life meant something for every life, no matter how hurt and scared."

I love this.

I know, however, that it is a difficult thing to go out into the world with a wounded heart.

Henri Nouen, though, reminds us that a wounded world needs wounded healers.

A wounded world needs us to be vulnerable.

A wounded world needs to experience human side of Jesus.

Show the world that Jesus' resurrected life means something for every life, no matter how hurt and scared.

STORY

I saw her sitting on the curb outside the laundromat, one shoe off, rubbing her heel.

"Good morning," I said.

She looked up and smiled the kind of smile that had learned to make do.

"Hey," she said.

A washer thumped behind the glass. Rhythmic. Steady. Like a second heartbeat trying to take over for the first.

“You alright?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Just tired.”

We sat there a minute. Cars passed. A siren blared in the distance. The world went on like it hadn’t noticed anything at all.

After a while she said, “You ever have something break in you and everything keeps working anyway?”

I nodded.

“I think something’s wrong with me,” she said. “It still hurts.”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “That’s how you know it was real.”

She looked at me, eyes wet but steady.

Inside, the washer stopped. There was silence just for a second.

Then a soft click.

“Funny thing,” I said, “wounded hearts don’t mean you’re dying.”

She waited.

“It usually means you’re still alive.”

IV. The Opened Heart

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28, GNT)

When Thomas finally meets the risen Jesus, his response—“My Lord and my God!”—is the heart thrown open.

No more barriers, no more conditions.

This is the image of surrender born not from argument, but from encounter.

The locked room becomes an open interior space.

“Then (Jesus) came to breathe on them,” preaches Barbara Brown Taylor, “and their fear turned into rejoicing. Somehow he knew that was what they needed more than anything, They had to be able to breathe before they could hear anything else. So he gave them divine CPR - gave them his own breath to bring them back to life - like God creating humankind all over again, only this time the breath came from the lungs of the Christ.”

I love this.

Say with Thomas to the crucified, risen Jesus, “My Lord and my God.”

Jesus will breathe life into your heart and open it to love, forgiveness, faith, hope, light, and joy.

Jesus will open your heart.

STORY

I met him at the bus stop on the edge of town.

He was talking to a stranger.

They weren't talking about big things. Just small things. The weather. The late bus. A joke that didn't quite land.

Still, there was something about them.

“It seems like you know him,” I said.

He smiled. “I just met him.”

That caught me by surprise.

A few minutes passed, and the stranger got on the bus. They nodded to each other like old friends.

I looked back at him. “Do you trust people easily?”

He shook his head. “No. It took me a long time.”

He told me about years of keeping people at arm’s length. About silence at dinner tables. About learning how to live without needing much from anyone.

“And then?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I got tired of being alone inside myself.”

A breeze moved through, warm and unafraid.

“So now?” I said.

He watched the bus disappear down the road.

“Now I just try to leave the door open a little,” he said. “Not all the way. Just enough.”

I nodded.

Sometimes that’s all an opened heart looks like—

a door, cracked wide enough for grace to slip in.

V. Benediction

Let’s go now looking closely with the eyes of our hearts, listening carefully with the ears of our hearts, walking with Jesus, being like Thomas the brave.

Let’s crack the doors of our hearts wide enough for grace to slip in.

The Lord is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed.

Amen.