

Acts 4:32-35  
1 John 1:1-2:2  
John 20:19-31  
Psalm 133

The Second Sunday of Easter  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
April 7, 2024  
The Rev. Judith McDaniel

One of the many groups available to St. Barnabas parishioners is a gathering of men and women who like to read and discuss Shakespeare. This week, however, they opted to reflect on a contemporary playwright of Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe. Specifically, they dove into Dr. Faustus, the story of the man who, in despair of tangible evidence of the existence of God, sold his soul to the devil. He despaired of hope. He traded the future for the present. In exchange for the power of certain knowledge and pleasure, Faustus succumbed to blasphemy. For it is blasphemy to strive for certainty because we cannot know all there is to know, and Faustus wanted to know, an attribute accorded only to the deity. Is the absence of certainty the tragedy of life itself? Perhaps. But it is also the glory. For in place of certainty, there is vision.

Have you ever noticed that the word “vision” can be either a noun or a verb? As a noun, vision is a remote concept one can hold at arms length, a thing one can touch. Used as a verb, however, the word “vision” means “envision.” In the same way, the word “believing” is a verb in the gospel according to John. The authors of John never use *pisteuo*, or faith, as a noun. So when our Lord says to Thomas, “Do not be faithless, but believing,” He is, in effect, saying, “Do not despair. Do not lack in faithing, but faith. Do it!” And there is no evidence that Thomas ever touched Christ’s wounds. He faithed.

Nor is there any evidence that Thomas was of the Hebrew religion. In fact, the name given him by the authors of John---Didymus---is Greek. But one thing we know for sure: In Thomas we have the image of a first century realist, the prototype of the twenty-first century scientific man. He is both objective and pragmatic, candid and determined, blunt and direct. There is something about Thomas that reminds us of the plain, sober, vulnerable everyman. There is something about him that reminds us of ourselves, people of finite vision, people who want proof.

We see Thomas beyond the Jordan with Jesus when news comes of the death of Lazarus. Although he is aware of the danger of returning to Judea, Jesus resolves to go to Bethany. And then comes a curious response from Thomas: His words are stubbornly loyal, yet pessimistic: “Let us go too,” he says, “and die with him.” He is obviously deeply devoted, but rather dull. For in this scene we recognize in him, as in ourselves, bravery but also a certain lack of expectation.

We next encounter Thomas in an upper room during the farewell discourse of Jesus. Here he displays an inquisitive mind and a desire for fuller understanding. When Jesus assumes His disciples know the way to the Father’s house, Thomas replies, “Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” He alone of the disciples is humble enough to ask for clarification, but the answer he receives is more like a riddle than an answer---nothing concrete, no rules, no procedures, no directions. And we are left with the feeling that if this

disciple ever had any sense of vision, the capacity to envision is evaporating. He is without any bench marks, without anything he can touch, without anything against which to measure what's going on. His sense of expectation, his sense of destiny is disappearing. He is despairing.

The disappearance of a sense of destiny is not so unusual. Lack of vision is very common; and in our culture, overwhelming. There is little room in our lives for anticipation and expectation. We deal daily with the necessity of answers...NOW. And yet increasingly we are confronted with issues that defy definition, much less resolution. For example, when does life begin---in a test tube or at delivery? When does life end---when it can only be prolonged by artificial means or when the brain ceases to function? What is the best way to fight terrorism---aggression or vigilance?

We are absorbed by the attempt to understand every conceivable human equation in terms of present experience. And in that absorption, the future is absent from our formula. We have given obeisance to knowledge, to the need to know and understand for ourselves now. Because we want something we can touch, our sense of vision has evaporated. We have denied the reality of grace; and with that denial we have lost the capacity to dream.

The disappearance of vision, the death of dreams for Thomas and for ourselves is insidious. In some ways this death comes very slowly. Year after year Israel had worked and planned, waiting for that time when all their hopes and dreams would be fulfilled. They had labored with care---obeying the law, following the rules that promised success, doing their best at what was expected of them. Like their fathers and mothers before them, they had somehow maintained faith in the satisfaction of their expectations, faith in the advent of justice, faith in the coming of harmony and peace. Always there had been the sense that someday their time would come, someday in the future things would work out fine, someday they would arrive at that moment that was the achievement of their goal. And now...their dreams were ended in nothingness and death. For the man they had thought to be their long-awaited Messiah was crucified.

In other ways the death of the capacity to envision comes quickly. Only days before, it had seemed to Thomas and his friends that the time of fulfillment had finally arrived. They were only just beginning to realize the benefits of all they had learned, only just tasting the fruits of their labors, only just sampling the results of their newly discovered freedom when suddenly all was engulfed in death....

This image of the death of a dream, the disappearance of visioning and faithing, could be the description of an older couple having just reached retirement, being confronted with an irremediable illness. But this loss of the ability to envision could just as easily be the picture of a young person, recently graduated from school, facing unemployment in a depressed economy. The death of dreams could be a portrait of those who followed Jesus 2,000 years ago; or equally, a depiction of the wealthier nations of the world today, turning their backs on impoverishment at home and abroad by a stance of toleration, the loss of visioning for all people as children of God.

To speak of the death of dreams is to speak of individuals and of nations, of generations thousands of years ago and of modern day humanity, of the decay of societies as a whole---politically, industrially, ethically. To speak of the death of dreams is to admit that human life is finite, to admit that we are limited, to admit that all living things end and that death is everywhere present and inescapable.

But we try to avoid the reality of death. We despair. We put out of our minds the loss of that which we can never regain: our childhood homes, the people with whom we grew up, the choices we did not make, the doors forever closed to us. And we pride ourselves on our mastery of the circumstances of our individual lives. We exalt the social planning of our government that has widened the boundaries of our being. We boast of the control mankind exercises over nature---even to the discovery of the fabled Higgs boson, the “God particle” itself. We strive to reap the benefits of the accumulated knowledge of generations, maintaining “live and let live” as our creed in order to affirm our security, all the while hiding from our faces the mortal convulsions of that which we denied.

Until one day, denial works no longer; and having kept the lid on death so long, we find that reality exploding into our consciousness with awe-filled power. Confronted by the end of our dreams, the death of a loved one, the certain knowledge that the world itself could be destroyed by some maniacal despot pushing a button, we awaken to the realization that we have not destroyed death as a power in and over life. We have affirmed death. In spending all our energies to escape death, we have proven death to be that which is most real to us. We have sworn allegiance to death; and faced with this truth, we with the disciple Thomas cry, “I refuse to believe in life.”

How many times a day, in how many different ways do you and I make that statement: “I refuse to believe in life.” In our lack of openness to the self hidden beneath the façade on the faces of those around us, in our impatience with the situations in which we find ourselves, in our fear of risk---the risk of sharing ourselves, the risk of caring for people or issues, the risk of seeing ourselves as others see us and trying to learn and grow. In all these ways, and more, we with Thomas are saying, “I must touch something tangible, else I refuse to believe in life.”

Called upon to present a paper to a seminar some years ago, I encountered a vivid demonstration of risk. The subject of my paper was a book by Cardinal John Henry Newman entitled *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. Newman’s project in this book is to demonstrate that Christian believing is just as viable as the process of scientific or any other kind of discovery. But my dilemma that afternoon was not so much the content of the paper; though in the form of a rough draft, the paper was relatively complete. No, my concern was with the presentation, how to go about enacting the reality of the concepts of Newman’s thought while keeping those thoughts vibrantly alive.

You see, as strange as it may seem for a Speech Communication forum, there had been many, many presentations of papers by visiting professors who simply read with eyes glued to their texts, heads buried in their papers. Though I had never expressed my feelings, I

always thought those presentations were deadly dull. They often quite literally put people to sleep. "How paradoxical," I said to myself, "for speech communication to be read communication." So I asked a mentor of mine, "I have a procedural question: How would you expect me to present this paper?"

Seated near us was a Ph.D. student. A pleasant though fairly reserved young man, he also happens to be the graduate of a conservative West Coast seminary. "Tell her, Ron," said my friend, "tell her how I like to see a paper presented." Instantly Ron began to gyrate and sing, "You gotta put down the Rubber Duckie if you wanna play the saxophone." It seems that he, along with his children, had watched this song being danced and sung on "Sesame Street" the previous week. With his performance, he was trying to say that I should lay aside my paper and talk to bring to life the ideas that were meaningful for me; I needed to talk, not read, to make the words reality. And so I tried. But it struck me that that funny little phrase held more in store.

Sure enough, less than two weeks later, I received from the Community of the Holy Spirit our annual Lenten letter. The convenor began her remarks, "Dear Ones... 'you gotta put down the Rubber Duckie if you wanna play the saxophone.'" For her the rubber duckies signified habits, objects, attitudes, even people, and I quote, "that are so much a part of our existence that we can't conceive of doing without them. Indeed, like Ernie [of Sesame Street], we may be scarcely aware of the tight hold we have on them; or more accurately, they on us." End quote.

In both of these instances the Rubber Duckie song served as an example of letting go of those things that may give us security but at the same time hinder our personal growth, hinder our ability to stay open to new life and see the reality of God at work in this world. For Rubber Duckies are something you and I can touch. Rubber duckies, security blankets, whatever you consider to be your bottom line are a barrier until we are willing to let them go. All too easily our self-defensive actions and reactions turn to suspicions and negative attitudes. Ideas or concepts that become rigid, feelings that solidify are barriers just as real as those closed doors behind which the disciples huddled before the risen Lord appeared in their midst. Unless we let go, there is no room for something not of our own making to enter. Unless we relinquish the need to touch, there is no new creation.

Jesus is not asking Thomas or us to replace doubt with belief as a concept. No, he is asking Thomas and us to do our part, to faith as an action, to put down the rubber duckie of habits of thought, concepts we hold dear, expectations of what life should provide us, assumptions of positions we hold, to put aside despair and instead to step out into the unknown future with trust that God is actively engaged in the direction our lives will take. He asks us to trust that God is preparing a vision for us, that God is the subject of an active verb, that God comes out of the future, not the past.

So step out into that future, wherever that step may take you or me, ready to write the new vision that God will provide; for there is still a vision for the appointed time. Alleluia!