

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 11, 2022

Patronal Feast Day

Procession and Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

on

Hebrews 10:35-11:1; John 20:24-29

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Grief is the price we pay for love.

If you think that this is going to be a sermon about her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, then you may be disappointed...or relieved, depending on how the events and newscasting of those events over the past few days has affected you. I have written twice in very personal way about how her death has peculiarly affected me, as it has affected millions of others around the world, but to preach about her today, on our Patronal Feast Day, and on the anniversary of 9/11 would be a self-indulgence and she, herself, did not approve of self-indulgence. And yet, there is something wonderful about the history of her life of duty, service, and faithfulness that connects most powerfully with the celebration of our Patron Saint Thomas, and the commemoration of 9/11, and it begins with that incredible sense of grief and loss that so many of us have been feeling these past few days; the same grief and loss that so many people still feel so keenly because of 9/11. So, how poignant that on this eleventh day of September, as I preach next to the 9/11 memorial of this Church, we see words of Queen Elizabeth inscribed in the stone. They come from the last paragraphs of her message to the people of New York read at the memorial service held shortly after 9/11:

"These are dark and harrowing times for families and friends of those who are missing or who suffered in the attack - many of you here today. My thoughts and my prayers are with you all now and in the difficult days ahead.

But nothing that can be said can begin to take away the anguish and the pain of these moments. Grief is the price we pay for love."

But nothing that can be said can begin to take away the anguish and the pain of these moments.

That is exactly what Thomas was feeling when he met with the other disciples after the Lord's death.

We know something of the grief and anxiety that the followers of Jesus were feeling after his death, particularly among those who fled the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke tells us that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus "stood still, looking sad." The ancient ending of Mark's Gospel has the women discovering the empty tomb and then running away terrified. Mark says, "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." In John's moving account of the Resurrection, Mary Magdalene cannot even recognize Jesus when he is standing in front of her because of the weight of her own grief, and her tears blur her vision. Why is this? I think it is because the death of Jesus happened very quickly: Arrested in the night on Thursday, and by 3 o'clock the following afternoon he had been tried, publicly humiliated, scourged, and crucified. As Father Victor Austin so powerfully used to say, he was "Dead as a doornail."

Some of you, here in this church, may have experienced the sudden death of a loved one. So many people experienced that gut-wrenching feeling on September 11, 2001, and sudden death seems to add another element to grief. Both my father and my mother died of cancer; in my father's case, it was three months from diagnosis to death; for my mother, one year. But we were able to prepare, to make them comfortable, to share stories, even to feast and to laugh, and to get out the photo albums; to ensure that we raked their brains about the family tree; to write down their wishes and their messages; to plan their funerals. But when someone dies suddenly, is taken away brutally and without warning – as has happened to some of you – as happened to the families of those who died on 9/11 – as happened to the followers of Jesus – there is an added dimension to grief; a dimension that begins with disbelief but quickly twists and turns into desperation and fear, one's head swimming with disorientation. Yes, we can imagine how Thomas was feeling and as Queen Elizabeth so rightly said, "nothing that can be said can begin to take away the anguish and the pain...grief is the price we pay for love."

"Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with the other disciples when Jesus came. So, the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.'"

Grief is the price that Thomas paid for love of him who had afforded him hope. Thomas has had a bad press throughout the ages; often his name is prefixed with the adjective 'doubting.' Poor old doubting Thomas – he was not doubting, he was *grieving*. If anything, the adjective should be 'honest' – honest Thomas who questioned and refused to be comforted by mere words which seemed so hollow to him. 'I will not believe.' And why should he? The other disciples apparently had seen the Lord – but he had not. Earlier in John's Gospel, a reading we shall hear at evensong this afternoon, our honest Thomas again questioned Jesus. Jesus was talking about his coming passion and death, but in the context of a journey to eternal life and the promise of a new beginning:

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

From now on you do know him and have seen him.

Words were not enough – so the Word became flesh, and God made his home among mortals. When people found it impossible to respond to God's invitation to love, he personified love itself by pouring himself into his creation – making himself small in the womb of Mary – the Creator assuming mortality so that mortals could once again come close to God. Our faith is not in mere words or even promises, it is in our Lord Jesus Christ who, as St Paul says, is 'the image of the invisible God – the firstborn of all creation' (Colossians 1:15)

And Jesus reached out to Thomas – "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Jesus knew that, one day, he would depart from his disciples and he wanted to instill in them the gift of faith that would help them through hard times as well as good. As we heard in the letter to the Hebrews, "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" So, the most important part of the Gospel reading today is not Thomas meeting the resurrected Jesus; it is not even his declaration of faith, "My Lord and my God!" It is the words spoken by Jesus after that declaration that we need to take to heart today: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*"

My friends, those words are for us, today. **Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.**

The late Archbishop Michael Ramsey had a beautiful description of those words of the Lord; he described them as *"The last Beatitude."* He described these words as, somehow, linked with Christ's Sermon on the Mount – his manifesto of the Kingdom of God and how things would be turned upside down; not as the world would have them. Turning bad news into good news.

Preaching on this same text, and as if he were preaching to those who lost loved ones on 9/11, or to those who are grieving for other reasons; or for those who are grieving the death of Queen Elizabeth, Michael Ramsey said this: *"So to all of us the last Beatitude is spoken. Happy are you, you in any century, you in any place...you in any part of the world, you perhaps who are in cruel grief and sorrow, you perhaps who are bewildered and frustrated: happy are you, happy because though you do not see Jesus your Easter faith is sure."*¹

Grief is the price that we pay for love. But as we read in the Song of Songs, *'love is stronger than death, and many waters cannot quench love.'* (see Songs of Songs 8:6-7)

Words from the Book of Revelation:

"God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." (Revelation 21:4-5a)

¹ Sermon preached in Canterbury Cathedral, Easter 1972. Published in 'Canterbury Pilgrim'