

Canon Jack E. Lindquist  
St. Paul's Cathedral, San Diego Homily for  
Easter II (3/30), 2008

## WHAT TO DO WHEN IT'S "THOMAS TIME"

Risen Christ, come to us in our "Thomas times," that we, too, may love you as our Lord and our God. Amen.

My dear friends,

There is a little message from me in today's program newsletter, thanking all the dozens of people in this cathedral family who have poured out their sympathy over the death of my dear mother, Esther Lindquist Allen, at age 102. I conducted her memorial service on the Friday before Palm Sunday, and your support has been wonderful. Indeed, I'm bringing it up in this sermon because, first of all, I am sincerely grateful, and secondly because it makes today's Gospel Story "up close and personal:" the Resurrection of Jesus Christ! I mean, let's face it: you and I never think about the Resurrection – what on earth really happened there, and how we should understand it, and how it might relate to our lives and deaths today – we just don't deal with any of that, unless death first of all gets our attention. Somebody dies! And sometimes death can so completely get our attention, and be so overwhelming and devastating, that when the message of the Resurrection does come up we have no place for it, no way to work it in and believe in it. Now, that's not what happened to me with my mother's death, which was very peaceful and blessed and expected, but that is what happened to Thomas with Jesus' death, and that's what happens to all of us in what I call our "Thomas times" ..... yes, our "Thomas times." Our "Thomas times" are when life, what happens in life, can crush our faith in New Life.

You see, the horror and the heartbreak of Jesus' death, the Cross, had so scalded Thomas' eyes and memory that he wasn't going to open himself up to further disappointment. Thomas was not a cool, rational, scientific person here, as he's often been portrayed. Oh no, he had really loved and followed Jesus; indeed, according to John 11:16, he had even been willing to "die with him!" But the Cross had not been a noble, heroic death, as on the field of battle; this had not been the dramatic death of a martyr, after a ringing speech in the arena; no, this had been a Roman crucifixion, designed to degrade and

destroy not only the criminal himself but all the following and attractiveness and credibility he'd ever had and to leave him not even a memory in the world, like the thousands of men crucified in the Roman Empire. Thomas couldn't see how Jesus could ever come back from that, and he wasn't going to let his hopes be smashed again. And yet... and yet... Thomas went back to the community of the disciples, please note, back to what was now the community of the Risen Christ! No, he didn't accept their new "Easter Faith," their story of how the Risen One had come to them, but he knew they would accept him. He knew he still had a place there, and was still welcome there, faith or no faith..... and what he found was a community completely transformed.

Notice their new beliefs as they are spelled out in today's Gospel:

First of all, in the Risen Christ, God is now completely victorious over all the powers of sin, death and despair, all that has ever enslaved and destroyed God's beloved human beings in body, mind and spirit. God has totally redeemed God's creation, and the Renewed Human — Jesus — has now come from glory and suddenly stood among them, an event from outside of themselves, shaking them out of their grief and guilt.

Secondly, he has poured over them his peace and forgiveness; "Peace be with you," he has said, to these people who had all forsaken him and fled and denied him at his arrest. That's the "resurrection" of their self-respect; with his forgiveness, they can now forgive themselves!

Thirdly, and this is truly amazing, the Risen Christ has breathed God's Spirit on them and actually "apostled" them; that is, he is "sending" them out to speak his own word of forgiveness to others, just as God sent him, Jesus, to speak God's forgiveness! (In the Greek of the New Testament, an apostolos is just such a commissioned and authorized person, with "power of attorney," like the ambassador of a king.) Think of it: the Risen Jesus is going to use the lips of these sinful, imperfect people — like Peter, who denied him three times! — and through them he will forgive their fellow sinners! "As the Father has sent (or apostled and authorized) me," he says, "so just as much do I send you..... Now if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven by me, (that's what the Greek text means here!), and if you retain the sins of any — that is, if you call and invite any to repent, which means to turn their lives around from destructive behavior —

if you do that, then they are called and invited by me.” And so, my friends, out of the Easter Event comes the apostolate, and (as we can see in later New Testament writings) it’s going to continue in the “laying on of hands in the ordination of those bishops and presbyters in letters like First and Second Timothy and Titus. It’s going to become what we call the “apostolic succession!” Yes, here begins the sacred ministry of the Church, and through it the Risen Christ still speaks his own word of forgiveness, his “absolution,” through the lips of our “fellow sinners,” the pastors and priests! Now

Think of it, my friends: all of these new beliefs are what “Doubting Thomas” walks into when he returns to the disciples after the Resurrection! They are certainly not afraid of “the Jews” anymore, a term which means “the religious authorities” in John’s Gospel; for that matter, Jesus and his disciples were just as “Jewish” as those authorities themselves, but now they’re not afraid of anything anymore! The Lord is risen! And when Thomas resumes his place in their midst – when his doubts and sorrows are surrounded by all that joy and peace and forgiveness – then the Risen Christ becomes utterly real to Thomas, too, and he cries out to Christ those titles that John’s Gospel is all about, and Easter is all about: “MY LORD AND MY GOD!” In saying and believing those words, now Thomas isn’t afraid of anything anymore, either!

You see, by the time John’s Gospel was written, in the 90’s of the First Century, those words were the oath of obedience required by the Roman Emperor. The Emperor Domitian, who reigned from AD 81 to 96, required this oath of everyone, even his own relatives, and put people to death if they wouldn’t swear it, and especially persecuted the Christians if they refused it: “MY LORD AND MY GOD!” KYRIOS THEOS in Greek; DOMINUS ET DEUS in Latin. It was exactly like “Heil Hitler” in Nazi Germany! Only here Thomas is shown swearing it to the Risen Christ, and thus raising Christ high above all other powers and authorities, claims and priorities an allegiance that could get one into an enormous amount of trouble back then, and still can today! Here is where Easter becomes political.

For example (and I close with this), one week from this Wednesday, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, both the Episcopal and the Lutheran calendars will observe the sixty-third anniversary of the martyrdom of Deitrich Bonhoeffer, a thirty- nine year-old

German Lutheran pastor and theologian who who was hanged by the Nazis at the Flossenberg Concentration Camp on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945. He's very important in a new course I'm teaching at the University of San Diego, dealing with "The Holocaust and the Churches in Nazi Germany." In the midst of a State Lutheran Church that had largely caved in to Adolph Hitler - with bishops heiling their heads off in churches draped in Nazi swastika banners (and I have nauseating photographs of them doing that; an apostate apostolate!) – here was this determined pastor living out the title of his book, The Cost Of Discipleship, opposing Adolph Hitler to the death. Among his many acts of treason, he taught people not to give the Nazi oath and not to say "Heil Hitler"..... "All power to Hitler." "Heil Christus," he would say; "Heil Christ"... "All power to him." "Jesus Christus ist mein Fuhrer," he would say; "Jesus Christ is my Fuhrer," my Supreme Leader. "Ich haben eine JUDISCHE Fuhrer," he would say; "I have a JEWISH Fuhrer!" "Heil, mein Herren and mein Gott," he would say; "All power to YOU, my Lord and my God!" Yes, think of him on April 9<sup>th</sup>, marched naked to the Nazi gallows of Flossenberg, and saying "Heil Christus!" He and Thomas are making the same point, for there is the defiant and victorious power of Thomas' Easter oath, "My Lord and my God," sworn not Caesar but to Christ. That's how it sounded in the Roman world, exactly like Bonhoeffer's "Heil" not to Hitler but to Jesus. And there is what Thomas also realized when he saw those wounds on Christ's glorified body: that Christ is Victor not only over death but also evil, and not only over sorrow but also brutality, like that Roman gallows on Golgotha! Yes, a whole new world – the Kingdom of God – is announced in how Thomas hails Jesus today, and a whole new Thomas does the hailing.

So now, my fellow Thomases and Thomasinas, let's remember this whenever it's "Thomas time" for us; that is, whenever what happens in our life crushes our hope of New Life. Let's remember what our Saint Thomas did and let's follow him, for he went back to the community of the Risen Christ..... back to where Christ's Easter joy is known, and where his peace is shared..... back to where his forgiveness is spoken through his ministers, and where his Holy Meal is offered..... and, yes, back to where his story is read, the story that was written (as today's Gospel puts it)..... "written so that you may

come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life through his name”..... you may be united with the Risen One, in this world and the next! Spread the invitation to your friends: everyone going through a “Thomas time” is welcome here in this cathedral – with faith or no faith, doubts and all, sorrows and all, exactly as they are and as Thomas was – welcome to join us in this community, that they may find their Lord and God here, too. AMEN.