

Sunday, May 1, 2011: John 20:19-31

by [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#) in the [April 19, 2011](#) issue

For several years I was an associate pastor on the staff of a large congregation. I often found myself preaching on the Sunday following Easter, a Sunday that's sometimes called "low Sunday." In the rhythm of life among God's people, low Sunday is the calm after the storm.

I came to love this Sunday because it was then that I became acquainted with Thomas. In the Eastern Orthodox Church this day is sometimes referred to as St. Thomas Sunday; the tradition credits Thomas with taking the gospel to India in the first century. Many of us know him as "doubting Thomas," but our Orthodox friends remember instead his confession of faith ("my Lord and my God!").

In the Gospel of John, Thomas is in conversation with Jesus about the faith, and included in that faith is struggle and doubt. If the women are the first evangelists, we might designate Thomas the first seeker. Jesus has risen and is about to leave the disciples. Thomas asks him, "We do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus responds, "I am the way, the truth and the life" (14:5-6). Thankfully, the disciples allowed Thomas his quest. In his skepticism he represents all of us who come to faith and continue in faith with perseverance and struggle.

As we make our way forward in our own pilgrimages, we search for assurance, some basis for faith and hope. In the midst of perseverance, struggle and doubt, we look for signs. John the Evangelist was a master at telling us about the good news through the signs of Jesus: turning water into wine, feeding the hungry multitudes, giving sight to the blind. Jesus is the word become flesh, something we can sense. Thomas is located near the source of a long tradition of those looking for signs. Thus he declares: "I will not believe unless I see in his hands the nail prints, and place my finger in his wounds." In other words, he wants to experience it himself.

Jesus' question, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" indicates that he did not think too highly of those always looking for a sign, a proof. But he follows this comment with a beatitude: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). There would be generations of men and women who

would believe—not because of experiences like those of Thomas, but because of the signs written in the book. Jesus' teaching always seems to be the opposite of our usual way of thinking. Not "if you see, you might believe," but "if you believe, you will see," or, as St. Anselm expressed it, "I believe in order that I might understand. "

For the believer all of life can be a sign. One evening I was shopping at a local grocery store. Easter was approaching. Our children were returning for the holiday, along with one or two of their friends, and I was trying to remember their favorite foods. I came upon Ken, chairman of our church's governing board. He was there to buy ice cream for his wife, Kelly, who was in the midst of an extended struggle with cancer.

Kelly's appetite had diminished in recent months, but that evening she was hungry, so Ken was in the store to buy just one thing: her favorite ice cream. We talked for a couple of minutes, parted ways and completed our shopping. (Men seem to avoid spending long periods of time in grocery stores.) The next day Ken commented that his wife's favorite ice cream had been on sale—buy one, get one free. Ken is by nature an accountant, and one of the most rational people I know. But "buy one, get one free," he said, was a sign.

In John's Gospel the signs are not proofs; quite the reverse. If you believe, Jesus seems to be saying, you will see. After the resurrection, we look for the signs by faith. Maybe we no longer hear soprano voices soaring above us in the alleluia descants. We're back "down to earth," and the enthusiasm wanes, the crowds disperse, life goes on. If we are listening on a "low Sunday," we might be thinking along with Thomas: We do not know where you, Christ, and thus, by extension, where we, where all of this is going. How can we know the way?

Later in the story when Thomas and Christ meet again, there is a moment of intimacy. Thomas touches the wound, and incarnation is joined to resurrection: a last and unexpected sign.

Because we believe, we see. In faith, we seek understanding. Again and again the Easter gospel attracts a stream of seekers and encompasses faith and doubt, miracles and rationality, woundedness and peace. We follow Thomas in faith, leaving behind Easter Sunday and embarking on a journey of seeing more clearly, loving more dearly and following the truth and the life.