

You believe in me, Thomas, because you have seen me, says the Lord; blessed are they who have not seen me, but still believe!

Today's readings could be described as being an early version of "before and after" selling. In the Gospel Thomas is the ultimate hard-bitten consumer, unwilling to believe anyone's claims, even his friends', unless he has the evidence in front of him. Jesus risen from the dead? He won't believe it unless he can see it with his own eyes, in fact unless he can feel the very wounds of the cross on Christ's body. And of course, Jesus obliges: "Put your finger here.... Give me your hand; put it into my side. Doubt no longer but believe." Faced with such overwhelming evidence, Thomas does indeed believe.

But there is another striking "before and after" image presented to us in the readings. John tells us that "the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were for fear of the Jews." But the picture of what happened after that, once Jesus had given the gift of the Holy Spirit, is totally different. The description of that early Christian community in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles is light years away from the frightened, disheartened, tiny group of disciples huddled together in that upper room. Once the Spirit is given, all fear is gone. The disciples preach openly; they exhibit courage and praise and the community grows in numbers. And indeed, the reading goes on further. It also describes a 'before' and an 'after.' The 'before' is our present life of faith, which gives us joy and hope, but is also tinged with trials and suffering. Peter promises that there will be an 'after' - once this time of testing is over - then we can come into the inheritance promised to us, an eternal reward which can never be spoiled, and the salvation of our souls.

The readings today are not simply descriptions of past events, of what happened to Thomas and that early Christian community. They are; models of what God can do for us in our individual lives, in our parish and religious communities. He takes away our fear and replaces it with his peace. He fills us with his Spirit so that we too can form a community which is faithful to the teaching of the apostles, centered on the breaking of the bread and

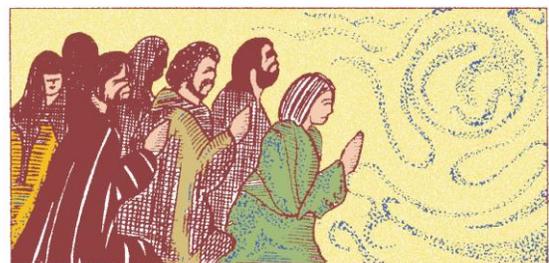


© J.S. Paluch Co., Inc.

prayer, and where all members care for each other's needs. He sends us out, with a mission, his mission, and he promises to work with us through "miracles and signs" to confirm the message he gives. We simply need to make that leap of faith, as Thomas did.

This is neither a fairy tale nor wishful thinking; this is the common experience of Christians throughout the centuries. The community Peter wrote to didn't live in some romantic Christian Paradise. They knew real danger, real pain, even death

for the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ. He reminds them and us that no matter what the trials we face, real faith is possible: "You did not see him yet you love him." Or as Jesus tells Thomas "Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe." We each face the trials of life and of faith in our own particular ways. We could face rejection or hostility because of our faith; our faith could have cost us a career or friends. Maybe our cross is that of physical illness, grief, poverty or loneliness. Whatever our trials, Peter encourages us to take heart, to keep our faith alive, to remember the hope we now have, and to look forward to that glorious "after" which awaits all those who remain faithful.



© J.S. Paluch Co., Inc.