

The Presence of Jesus

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Then to Thomas, Jesus said this: ‘Put your finger here and examine my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not persist in your unbelief but believe.’ Thomas answered, ‘My Savior and my God!’” — John 20:27-28.

I want to set up a trick question for you. Now that I’ve said it’s a trick question, the answer will likely be obvious.

Here’s the set up. Cleopatra, commonly identified as the Queen of Egypt, lived from approximately the year 69 Before the Common Era to the year 30 Before the Common Era. She therefore lived less than 100 years before New Testament Times.

Now, in the year 2,670 Before the Common Era— 4,700 years ago— construction started on the Great Pyramids of Egypt. I will not mention when the last of those Great Pyramids were built, because that information helps define the trick. The question: did Cleopatra live closer to the building of the *last* of the *Great* Pyramids or did the Queen of Egypt live closer to our time today?

The obvious answer, since I said this is a trick question, is Cleopatra lived closer to our times than to the time the last Great Pyramid was constructed. I, hence, suspect you knew the answer even before I said it. Full disclosure— the minor detail of *how* I set that question up, the trick— I used a specific limit.

I specified the *Great* Pyramids. The last of the Great Pyramids was constructed about 4,200 years ago. There were, in fact, some pyramids built after that but they are not considered to be among the group Egyptologists label as the *Great* Pyramids.

Even among these lesser pyramids, the construction ended a long time ago, about 3,900 years ago. Two more minor structures date to 2,800 years ago. But 2,800 years— that’s still a long time ago. [1]

Again and to be clear about the math, construction of the Great Pyramids ended about 2,300 Before the Common Era. [2] Since the Common Era started 2,000 years ago and Cleopatra lived less than 100 years before the Common Era started, her lifetime was clearly closer to our time than an era which ended 2,300 years Before the Common Era by about 200 years.

This leads us to a very simple thought. All that math— I know— math is tough. 4,700 years ago— when construction began on the first Great Pyramid— is a long, long time in human history. So long that, in one sense, the very presence of the pyramids is how we know the Pharaohs, as individuals, even existed.

The pyramids, after all, mark their graves sites. The pyramids are physical markers which attest

to their reality, attest to their life. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the Gospel according to the School of John: “Then to Thomas, Jesus said this: ‘Put your finger here and examine my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not persist in your unbelief but believe.’ Thomas answered, ‘My Savior and my God!’” (Slight pause.)

There are times I think our prime source of information about Scripture comes from novels, hymns, movies and Renaissance art rather than what the text actually says. Here are two examples of that reliance on the artwork of popular culture, both of which I have noted before.

The first one: people will often say the Apostle Paul got knocked off a horse. And Paul falling off said horse *is* an image used in hundreds of paintings which address that episode. But check out that story in Acts. There is no horse.

Next, we have all kinds of Christmas Carols about singing angels. But you can hunt all over Luke 2 and never find an angel who sings. You need to read the text very carefully to understand no angels sing since singing is implied. But the words never say the angels sing. It’s just not there.

Equally I suspect our cultural image of the interaction of Thomas and the Risen Christ has the Apostle who doubts placing a finger in the wounds made by nails and a hand in the wound made by a spear. And I suspect you’ve seen many paintings which picture the event that way. But there is no mention of any such action by Thomas.

The response of Thomas to the invitation of Jesus to place a finger in the wounds made by the nails and a hand in the wound made by the spear is only and simply a verbal response. Thomas says, “My Savior and my God!” (Slight pause.)

When I introduce the Gospel reading on Easter Sunday I always say this. (Quote:) “There are no Resurrection stories in Scripture, no stories about the Christ coming out of the tomb. There are only post Resurrection stories.”

In many of the post Resurrection stories Jesus seems to do physical things, like eat. Even appearing and disappearing would in some sense would be physical. And yet, and yet in these stories no one ever physically touches the Risen Christ. Indeed, in the Gospel we know as John when Mary of Magdala interacts with Jesus, the Risen Christ says these words (quote:) “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to Abba, ascended to God.”

I have always wondered about that statement. Does it mean Jesus is in some way available after the Ascension that Jesus was not in some way available after the Resurrection? (Slight pause.)

Unlike the Pharaohs, we have no physical marker, no grave of Jesus. There are places in the region called Roman Palestine in New Testament times which are, unquestionably, places where

Jesus trod.

And there are some sites which lay claim to being the exact places where certain things happened. But those claims lack any proof of veracity. They are simply claims about— well, Jesus was buried here or Jesus was born here. [After all, I can claim I won the Masters. That does not mean it's true— simply a claim.] (Slight pause.)

So what is the presence of Jesus? (Slight pause.) I want to suggest all the post Resurrection stories in Scripture try to do two things.

First and foremost, they are not there to tell a story. The post Resurrection tales are there to express theology, to say something about theology, to say something about God.

Therefore and second, the real question becomes 'what is the theological statement being made?' I think the theological statement being made is that the presence of Jesus can be felt.

If that claim is true— that the presence of Jesus can be felt— the question for us here, today, becomes how? How can the presence of Jesus be felt? What does the reality of presence Jesus feel like? (Slight pause.)

In a couple of minutes we are going to dedicate, bless the quilts. [3] I want to suggest things like the quilts, these quilts, *are* physical markers of the presence of Jesus. [4] Why? The making and the giving of the quilts tells us something about reaching out to others, following the example of Jesus by showing care, by showing love.

Perhaps more to the point, I think the presence of Jesus, the reality of that presence, is a spiritual experience, a feeling, a sense. Physical markers are a fine statement if you are a Pharaoh of Egypt. But I don't think Jesus needs one.

Our claim as Christians is there is more to the Christ— *there is more to the Christ*— than can be attributed to a mere physical marker. I, hence, *am* suggesting the presence of Jesus *can be* felt.

It can be felt, for instance, in how we treat one another. Do we treat one another with love, respect, kindness, patience? Do we treat one another as God would have us treat one another?

After all, the response of the Apostle who doubted was humble. In humility Thomas said, "My Savior and my God!" rather than reaching out and looking for that physical marker.

I think we, in humility, in the same kind of humility expressed by Thomas, need to treat one another as God would have us treat one another— with love, respect, kindness, patience. When we treat one another with love, respect, kindness, patience we can feel and see that the Christ is present to us all.

And when we treat one another with love, respect, kindness, patience is when we are empowered

to acknowledge, in humility, the presence of the risen Christ. Last, when we treat one another with love, respect, kindness, patience *we act, we act*, as the physical presence of risen Christ. We act as the makers. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “The Thought for Meditation today is a quote from Marcel Proust: ‘The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.’ And when the Gospel reading was introduced this was said ‘...the reason for the writing of this Gospel is clearly stated (quote): “...these have been recorded so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ,....”’ Christ is the Messiah— that is a theological statement. Therefore, the theological claim made is, because Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is with us and that God walks with us. Perhaps our new eyes that Proust suggests need to be theological eyes— eyes constantly aware of the presence of God.”

BENEDICTION: Hear now this blessing: we go into the world carrying forth God’s love. Let us go from this place and offer the peace of God which surpasses all understanding to all we meet, and may the Peace of Christ keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and companionship of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier, this day and forever more. Amen.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_pyramids

[2] <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/the-egyptian-pyramids>

[3] A Blessing, a Dedication of quilts made by the Chenango Piecemakers. These will be distributed to newborns at Chenango Memorial Hospital and people who avail themselves of the Chenango County Catholic Charities Domestic Violence protection program.

[4] Within a week after the posting of this sermon you will be able to see photos of the ceremony on the web site of the United Church of Christ, First Congregational or Norwich, NY.
<<http://www.uccnorwichny.org/photos/>>