

"Thomas said, '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.'" (John 20:25)

Second Sunday of Easter

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I daydream. Sometimes even during Mass. Blessed with a rich imagination, I stand at the very same altar every single day facing the very same people sitting in the very same pews. I try hard to stay focused, but some days it's not possible. Anyway, it's where the story begins: a reverie as I stand at the altar holding aloft the golden chalice as the congregation sings, "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again."

Staring at that upheld chalice, I experienced a sudden flashback to 1960 when, as a 12 year-old altar boy, I had just finished serving a 6:30 AM Saturday Mass at Christ the King Church. Fr. Donovan, our kindly pastor and, alas, a chain smoker, had dashed out the side door of the church right after Mass to light up a cigarette while greeting the small congregation as it exited. It was left to us pair of altar boys to complete the post-Mass chores: extinguish candles, refill water and wine cruets, hang up the priest's vestments, and place in the sacristy safe the chalice and paten, this last chore a most sacred duty, accomplished only with the aid of the appropriate hand covering. For, you see, in those earlier times, we were taught that the chalice and paten, the golden cup and plate that held the very Body and Blood of Christ, could only be touched by hands that had been consecrated for sacred service, that is, the hands of a priest. Only he was allowed direct contact with the chalice and paten. So, to accomplish the task at hand while Fr. Donovan was outside having his smoke, one of us altar servers would take in hand a small altar linen through which we'd then grasp the chalice and paten, thereby avoiding direct fleshly contact with the sacred vessels. It was our well-rehearsed protocol, drilled into us before we were ever allowed to serve at the altar, and we followed it precisely each time we served. Except this particular day.

It was a drear Saturday morning with fellow server Scott, both of us suffering head colds. We mumbled through the prescribed Latin prayers at Mass and robot-like performed our functions. Our bodies moved, but our brains were clearly still home tucked away under the covers. With Mass over, Fr. Donovan continued the morning ritual with a hasty exit from the church for a cigarette and pleasantries with the departing faithful. In the sacristy and out of the public eye, Scott and I were less ardent than usual in the fulfillment of our duties owing to our sniffing, snuffling conditions. Indeed, on that morning I so forgot myself that I picked up the chalice and paten with my bare hands -- yes, my bare hands -- and replaced them in the sacristy safe. Scott was unaware of my trespass, preoccupied refilling the water and wine cruets, and while I knew God was watching, I didn't think he'd be nearly as upset as would Fr. Donovan should he find out. Well, not only did he find out, he'd been watching me. Fr. Donovan, I mean.

Having just returned to the sacristy, the last puff of cigarette smoke exiting dragon-like his flared nostrils, he silently observed my blasphemy from the doorway. While his look was stern, more disappointment than anger, he spoke not a word and never mentioned the incident in days to come. It seemed I'd hurt this kindly man by my irreverence. Thereafter, I was ever conscious of how I touched holy things.

Indeed, the care we take in reaching out toward the divine was echoed in a 1980 address to the graduates of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, when Professor of Pastoral Counseling William Oglesby stated that, "The problem is that you will handle the Holy Things professionally and discover that you have become calloused to them personally." I think that's just what happened when, as a 12 year-old altar boy, I let my mind wander from the holy task at hand. I'd allowed myself to become too comfortable with what remains ever mystery.

And thus we encounter Thomas in the gospel passage we hear today, the apostle who could only believe in Jesus' resurrection if he could actually touch the wounds. "Thomas said, '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.'" (John 20:25) Indeed, while Jesus called blessed those who had not seen yet still believed, still does he allow Thomas to touch the wounds. And touching, Thomas believed.

While I'd like to think my faith to be as strong as those disciples who could believe without touching, in reality I'm more like Thomas. In fact, as daily I touch the wounds of Jesus in those of broken body, mind and soul, my faith in the resurrection is strengthened. Especially am I conscious of touching the wounds of the resurrected Jesus when someone with every reason to curse the darkness chooses rather to laugh at it. And daily do I encounter such witnesses to the resurrection as I make rounds in the hospital. I guess because God knows my own faith needs the boost, he brings me face to face with his vibrant life pulsing through bodies that, according to their physicians, are coming to an earthly end. The people I meet laugh at such a narrow estimation of their condition. Sure, they have a terminal illness; indeed, there is nothing left for medicine to do; true, they ought to get their affairs in order. But die? It's all illusion, their faith seems to proclaim.

I've never forgotten the look of disappointment on Fr. Donovan's face so long ago when I handled holy things callously. The memory of his expression is a reminder that there are yet holy things before which I ought to stand in quiet awe. But I've come to understand these holy things to be the people God allows me to meet. Indeed, they are the living repositories of the wounds of Jesus, the living proof that Jesus walks risen among us. And daily am I invited to touch, to believe.