

My husband has a penchant for nicknames.
It probably comes from his sports background,
where everyone on the team gets called a variation of,
rather than their actual,
name.

But my husband's fondness for giving nicknames
always comes with an important proviso:
if you don't like your nickname,
you can reject it or change it.

I wonder if Thomas would like to reject or change his traditional nickname.

Because the church has dubbed him "Doubting Thomas"
for some time now.
Even though the Gospel of John never once calls him "doubting."
Even though John tells us *three times*
that Thomas was *actually* nicknamed "The Twin."
Even though the risen Christ's request to Thomas
is better translated as, "Do not be unbelieving, but instead believe."
We persist in calling him "Doubting Thomas."

I wonder if a better nickname would be "Honest Thomas."
That has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?
"Honest Thomas."

Because if Thomas is anything in our Gospel reading today,
he is honest!
He speaks sincerely, truthfully, openly
about himself and what he wants.

After Jesus was crucified, and after they had heard he was risen,
the disciples have locked themselves in a house
"for fear of the Jews."
After the synagogue shooting in San Diego yesterday,
I want to clarify what that phrase means.
The disciples were hiding
because they were afraid that established authorities
from their own religion would come after them.

(It'd be like me hiding from Bishop Humphrey
out of fear.)

They're also hiding from God,
because they remembered how they themselves had deserted Jesus,
the Son of God,
as he died.

While cowering, Jesus comes and stands among them and says,
"Peace be with you."

But Thomas wasn't there. He missed the whole thing!
His friends and fellow disciples tell him,
"We have seen the Lord! We have seen Jesus!"
But Thomas didn't.

Thomas could have had a *number*
of justifiable, understandable reactions to missing Jesus' visit.
He could have gotten defensive: *Well, I was out trying to find Jesus myself!*
He could have played it calm and understated:
OK, that's cool. Mary already told us he's risen anyway.
He could have pretended like it didn't matter to him:
Whatever, I don't see the big deal.

But Thomas doesn't pretend or play or use a defense mechanism.
No, he gives us his honest reaction:
"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."

Thomas tells his friends the truth.
He tells them what it would honestly take for him to believe:
not only to see Jesus, but to see Jesus wounded *and* alive.
Not to take Jesus in with his eyes, but to *touch* Jesus with his own hands.
Thomas *could* have dodged the consequences of not having been there.
He *could* have pretended that seeing or touching Jesus didn't matter.
Instead, Thomas decides to tell the truth.
He bares his request and confesses his fervent desire.
He speaks honestly.

That's why I think "Honest Thomas" is a much better nickname than "Doubting."

And Thomas is not the last disciple
to practice bold honesty about himself or about God.
In our reading from Acts,
Peter and his fellow apostles get hauled in before the ancient temple's council.
The council had already thrown Peter and John into jail once
for preaching about Jesus.
An angel released them and told them to keep doing it,
so they went back to the temple to teach in Jesus' name.
The high priest reminds them,
"We gave you strict orders not to teach about Jesus,
but you're doing it anyways and riling people up!"

In their response, Peter and the apostles could have cast blame:
Well, the people wanted to hear more!
They could have understated their actions—
We were just chatting about him—
or denied them altogether.
But they respond by telling the truth about themselves in particular:
"We must obey God rather than human authority."
We are subject to God, this seems to say,
we belong to God, and nothing can overpower or supercede that.

Peter also tells the truth about humans in general.
He reminds them that Jesus was crucified,
that "you" plural—the priests *and* the Romans *and* the people—
had killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree.
Peter speaks honestly about how badly people treat each other.
Throughout his time before the councils in the Book of Acts,
Peter is honest about the part each person there played in Jesus' death,
honest even about the part that he, Peter, played.

Peter tells his audience the truth about themselves,
 so then he can then tell them the truth about God:
 “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus . . .
 and exalted him as Leader and Savior
 that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins.”
 Once we had done our very worst, this says,
God brought Jesus back from the dead to grant life and forgive sins.
 Peter speaks honestly.
 Honestly about the difficult parts of ourselves
 and honestly about the glorious power of God.

Honest Thomas. Honest Peter.
 Each shows us how those who experience the Risen Christ,
 those who dwell in the light of the resurrection,
 speak honestly.
 That is one way they are “Easter People”:
 because Christ is risen,
 they can tell the harsh truths about themselves
and the glorious truth about God.

And we today follow in their footsteps.
 We too are “Easter People”:
 we have experienced the Risen Christ
 and bask in the light of the resurrection.
 So, we also speak honestly.
 Honestly about our desires and our doubts.
 Honestly about how poorly we treat one another and God.
 Honestly about God and how we belong to God.

How do we do this? How do we, as Easter People, speak honestly?
 Our Lutheran liturgy is one guide.
 Because most Sundays
 we begin our worship speaking honest truths about ourselves.
 In the Confession of Sins, we speak the truth
 that we are sinners and cannot get away from sin ourselves.
 And when we give thanks for Baptism, as we do today,
 we recognize that our sinning does not singularly define us
 in the eyes of God

nor prevent us from belonging to God.
 At the beginning of each worship service,
 we speak honestly about how God forgives our sins,
 gives us new life,
 and loves us no matter what.
 There is no honest question or honest confession that God cannot handle.

And it's not only at the beginning at the font that we speak honestly.
 We are honest at the table as well.
 We approach the table empty handed,
 carrying nothing but honest truth about ourselves:
 all our sins and struggles and questions and doubts and demands.
 We bring those to God's altar.

And at the altar we hear the most honest words Jesus possibly ever spoke,
 the most honest words from God that we hear personally every Sunday:
 "This is my body. This is my blood. Given for you."
 There are no words more honest than these.
 Forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation come through these words.
 Despite the harsh, sinful truths about ourselves,
 the body of Christ *is* given *for us*; the blood of Christ *is* shed *for us*.

Today, we welcome to the altar two young women
 to hear these honest words from God.
 And while they have been baptized and raised in the church,
 and instructed in meaning of Holy Communion,
 today Cassie and Libby come to the altar like Thomas and Peter
 and like most if not all of us:
 with honest questions, sincere longings, and genuine struggles.
 They and we come to the altar with the truth
 that we don't have faith all figured out;
 that we don't deserve all this grace;
 that we may not believe now or at other times.

And coming to the altar, Libby and Cassie—and all of us—
hear the honest words of God,
the truthful words of Christ,
the life-giving words breathed into our midst from the Spirit:
“This is my body, given for you.” “This is my blood, shed for you.”
Honest words that say we are forgiven.
That God lives inside of us.
That we belong forever to God.

We may not always believe.
We will fall short and sin.
Yet because Christ is risen,
we are all Honest Thomases and Honest Peters:
speaking the frank truths about themselves *and* the glorious truth about God.
Because Christ is risen, we are Easter People, who speak honestly.

Alleluiah, Christ is Risen!
Christ is risen indeed!

AMEN.