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A Believing Community

Acts 4:32a

Thomas wanted to be alone. He was depressed by Jesus' death and he preferred to deal with his feelings in solitude. He was not surprised by Jesus' execution. He was a realist who recognized the danger signs better than most of the disciples. Some of them had considered Thomas to be a pessimist who was always prepared for the worst possible outcome. But the kind of death Jesus suffered was probably worse than Thomas had anticipated. For this was no heroic martyrdom but the shameful death of a condemned criminal.

The shame of Jesus' death convinced Thomas that there was no future for the church. A community built around a leader who had been humiliated in that way could not possibly survive. Consequently Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared to them. When they sought Thomas out to share this incredible news he was not convinced. He suspected that the others were living in denial and could not face the truth that there was no future for this community which had shaped their lives.

But everything changed for Thomas when he went back to church. In the context of that believing community he experienced the presence of the resurrected Christ. When Jesus appears this time he warns the disciples not to place too much emphasis on what they see. He says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe (John 20:29)." Even for those who see, faith is born in the context of a community of believers. This facet of Thomas' experience has been transmitted to every generation of the church.

We see this truth expressed in our liturgical celebrations today. The baptism of infants is an expression of God's intention that these children become part of a believing community. The sacrament calls each of us to take responsibility for the nurture of these children. Each of us is a godparent who promises to be there for these children and their parents. The culmination of this process is celebrated in the confirmation ceremony today. As the confirmands publicly confess their faith in Jesus Christ they will confirm their baptisms. They will take their places in the believing community which has helped to shape their lives and their faith. It is a time when all of us can celebrate the many different ways we have contributed to making this moment possible.

You may have heard of the 911 dispatcher in New Orleans who spent more than an hour on the phone with a ten year old girl who was trapped with her parents in the attic of her home as the Katrina flood waters rose. The girl was overcome with panic. The dispatcher did everything in her power to assist the child. But she could not guarantee that rescuers would reach her in time. All she could do was assure her that rescue teams were trying to reach them and remind her that she could trust her parents to do everything possible to provide for her safety. By the end of their conversation she had helped the girl overcome her panic attack. The situation continued to deteriorate but the girl was finally able to focus on what her parents were asking her to do. Then the phone connection was lost.

The dispatcher lived in agony for many weeks not knowing the fate of this girl with whom she had forged such a strong connection. Her sense of responsibility compelled her to continue the search for this family. One day when she least expected it the search came to an end. The door bell rang and the ten year old was there, waiting to greet her with flowers.

It is that kind of connection that defines a believing community. Luke saw it in the Jerusalem church where members pooled their financial resources to ensure that every need was met. Luke wrote in the 4th chapter of Acts that “those who believed were of one heart and soul (Acts 4:32a).” That is the Easter miracle that Thomas could not avoid and that we are invited to celebrate today.