
Robert Shaw and Doubting Thomas

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Second Sunday of Easter**

*"Peace be with you," Jesus said. When he had said this,
he showed them his wounded hands and his side.*

Anybody been listening to the radio lately?

About twenty years ago, I remember the most compelling fifteen minutes of radio I have ever heard. I can still sense almost every detail in that slice of time. I was serving an Episcopal parish in Cobb County, and I was making my usual hospital rounds, about to visit another person in pain. I was driving my little Honda Civic automobile, driving up South Cobb Drive toward what was then called Kennestone Hospital, in Marietta. I was listening to the radio. In those days, radio had not entered the shock-jock phase; it could still be a source of comfort as one drove.

It was an interview on the radio that filled that slice of my life. Those fifteen minutes were so engaging, so beautiful, really, that, when I turned into the hospital parking lot, I did not get out of the car. I kept the radio on and stayed in the car for fifteen minutes.

The interview was with Robert Shaw, the great music director and principal conductor of the Atlanta Symphony, founder of the Robert Shaw Chorale and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus. Some of you in this room sang with Robert Shaw, and some of you knew him very well.

Those of you who only recognize his name may not know that Shaw came from a family of chaplains, ministers, and missionaries. At one time, he himself intended to become a minister. But when he needed money for seminary studies, he accepted an offer from Fred Waring to form a glee club for a radio series. At that point, his vocation, his calling, actually became that of a minister of music.

During the interview that I heard, he told a story of taking the Chorale to a shabby little industrial town in Tennessee, where he intended to perform the Mozart Requiem. Apparently, the concert manager suggested that Shaw not perform it, because it was too "highbrow." Shaw directed it anyway.

Afterward, a young woman met him outside. "I suppose," she said, "that there are two kinds of people who would understand the Mozart Requiem: those sufficiently skilled in musical literature to appreciate its technical mastery, and those who have lately experienced a deep, personal tragedy. I am no musician. I am the second sort. Thank you, thank you very much."

Following that admission, Shaw talked about religious worship itself. He said that the first things necessary for authentic worship to occur are a sense of mystery and an admission of pain.

A sense of mystery and an admission of pain. Today, the Second Sunday of Easter is always the Sunday we hear about Saint Thomas. But today, mystery and pain are the reasons we remember St. Thomas. Mystery and pain are the reason we can worship with St. Thomas and say, "My Lord and my God!"

It was mystery that brought the resurrected Jesus Christ through the locked doors and into the presence of the disciples. It was mystery that marched through their fear and said, "Peace, peace be with you."

It is mystery that says "receive the Spirit." This Spirit that grants truth to human searching, this Spirit that brings hope to hospitals, this Spirit that always brings life, even out of death. That is mystery.

It is mystery that says "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." It is mystery that forgives even the sins of an idiot radio talk show shock-jock. It is mystery and hope and life and Spirit that the Rutgers University women's basketball team shows the world.

Mystery is also the reason we build challenging and awe-inspiring churches. Mystery lies behind our liturgies, our incense, our words, and our music. Finally, it is mystery that is at the depth of our experience of God, at the depth of our Eucharist, at the depth of our relationships.

The mystery of spirit, hope, and forgiveness is what Jesus brought through the locked doors on that evening a week after Resurrection Day.

Almost two thousand years afterward the mystery of the resurrection, Robert Shaw was speaking words of mystery to me on the radio. And he said that something else was necessary for authentic worship to occur: an admission of pain. An admission of pain is what that young woman in Tennessee had experienced when she heard the Mozart Requiem.

Pain is usually what we try to avoid these days. We are generally a people who try to numb our pain. We take tranquilizers and drugs to get rid of it. We even turn to religion as an opiate. We look for a church that will entertain us just like a television show might.

Maybe that avoidance of pain is what makes people inept at sensing how words themselves perpetuate pain and suffering. Maybe that avoidance of pain is what leads us to substitute entertainment for worship.

Today, the Second Sunday of Easter, the world calls Saint Thomas "Doubting Thomas," but I challenge that description. Thomas taught us that the resurrection of Jesus is not real unless it involves mystery and pain. For it is Thomas who puts into words, "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."

There is no resurrected Christ without a wounded Christ. There is no authentic resurrection without pain. There is no authentic life without an admission of pain.

In the gospels, Thomas is the first one to say to Jesus, "My Lord and my God." He is the first one to speak those words. He may be the first disciple who actually worships Jesus Christ. I believe he was the first because he could acknowledge mystery, the mystery of doubt and the mystery of pain.

How odd that doubt and pain are two human elements that we seem to deny a place in religious experience.

Not today. If we want to believe today, we must also be able to doubt. If we want resurrection today, we must also be willing to die. All those elements are part of the authentic religious experience. They are all part of authentic worship.

Listen again to what Jesus offered his disciples. He offers peace. "Peace be with you." He offers them the Holy Spirit; he breathes it into them. He offers them the power to forgive.

It is Thomas who makes it clear, that unless it is the wounded Christ who is making those offerings, then he will not believe. It has to be the Christ who has holes in his hands and a tear in his side! Otherwise, the peace, the spirit, the gift of

forgiveness, they are all worthless. They are fake!

It is only because our Lord is a wounded Lord that he can give those things. Peace cannot come from someone who has not known violence. Forgiveness cannot come from someone who has never been betrayed.

[We live in an age of raging religious ignorance and emotional fakery. In such an age, beware of getting salvation from someone who has all the answers and none of the pain. That is the attraction of modern fundamentalism, which offers simple answers, all neat and tidy and cleaned up and without mystery, just as neat and tidy as the plastic plants in television studios made up to look like living rooms. Neat and tidy and fake.]

St. Thomas reminds us that mystery cannot be faked. Pain cannot be faked. The resurrection which we celebrate today cannot be faked. It is real, fraught with mystery and wounds.

Like Thomas, let us not be afraid to touch our doubt. Let us not be afraid to touch wounds. When we touch that doubt, when we touch wounds, we might be touching Jesus Christ himself. Then we will know. The resurrection emerges in those who doubt, in those who suffer, even in us who sin and need forgiveness. Yes, we will know that the resurrection emerges in us!

AMEN.

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