

Many years ago, my aunt and uncle were living in what had been my great-grandparents' house. It smelled like cigarettes and mothballs and had spots on the carpet where Great-grandma's boston terrier didn't make it outside in time. It was home, though, a snug little house sitting on a few acres. There wasn't much room inside unless you turned sideways, but outside you and the half-a-dozen great danes had plenty of space to sprawl. While they were living there, my uncle promised they'd have a nice home someday. He was working on it, just be patient. My aunt didn't mind. She was happy to share her life with him, and he was happy, too. But her parents, coming from a polished neighborhood and a house with an upstairs and a basement too, her parents had a hard time making sense of such a small house and how two people and that many dogs and a kid on alternating weekends could live in a place like that. My aunt told them he was working on a nice house out on his cattle farm. Maybe it was the idea of him working on a house, or maybe it was what they saw as the unlikely combination of "cattle farm" and "nice," but they didn't buy it. And every time they'd see her, they'd poke at their house and how it didn't live up to what they expected for their daughter. And she'd tell them again that he was working on it. And without fail, they'd harrumph and say, "we'll believe it when we see it."

For years, my uncle worked on that house. He built it with his own hands, sometimes hiring a high school student to help over the summers or calling in a stone mason for the chimney which he was pretty sure he could manage on his own, but my aunt convinced him, for her sake, not to climb up there and risk his neck. She won that round, but he risked his neck many times over just to get that house upright. But when her parents heard he was doing everything himself, they scoffed again. "We'll believe it when we see it."

Most of the wood he used had lived a life before it got to him. The bigger beams came from old barns and the finer planks came from the cast off pile at the mill. The guys running the lumberyard laughed at him every time he came to load up. He was doing them a service by clearing out the old trash heap, but they laughed anyway. Bowed or knotted or a splinter's width shy of standard, it didn't matter to him, but the laughter stung. But he knew better. "Just wait until they see what I can do." He borrowed a massive planer that I shoved my fair share of planks through. Another machine cut tongue-and-groove pathways. Another punched little plugs to cover screw holes. And before you knew it, he'd amassed a mighty stack of cherry and oak and walnut that would one day become floors, cabinets, doors, and walls. It was a sight to behold. But it took him nine years -- nine years while also working fulltime as a teacher and a busdriver -- it took him nine years to mark the top of that hillside with a finished home. Well, finished enough to move in, at least. The guest bathroom still needed a toilet, and a couple of the rooms didn't have drywall yet, and the cabinets didn't have doors, but they would. On move-in day, some of her friends came to see the finished product, and what they saw was liveable but not spit shined. "It's been nine years. Will he ever finish? I'll believe it when I see it."

Eventually he did finish that house. It's enormous. The outside is a combination of stone and railroad ties, less a cabin in the woods and more a hunting lodge. Its mighty dormers pull the sky inside, and that towering chimney stakes claim to that place like a flag on the moon. The doors are heavy and hand carved with dogwood blossoms surrounding swirling stained glass. Above the massive stone fireplace, a mighty grayed beam from great-great-grandpa Wyatt's childhood home serves as a mantle, and emanating outward underfoot, a stunning pattern of different species of wood draws your eye out and upward to the cathedral ceiling and a staircase meant to be descended in style. I'm telling ya, the place is stunning. You know, I don't think my words do it justice. You'd probably just have to see it. My uncle is so proud, as he should be. And all those folks that laughed or scoffed, once it was good and done, he invited them all to come see it. And to a person, even the

lumberyard workers and, maybe more impressive, even the in-laws, to a person, they oohed and aahed and gasped and patted him on the back and said, "I never imagined it could be like this."

Y'all know I don't love this Gospel story about Thomas. I've talked about my qualms just about every year I've been here, and once Fr. Steve came up and said basically the same thing: Thomas gets a bad rap. He's not around when Jesus shows up and the other disciples get to see his wounds, and then when they tell him, he says he'd love to see those wounds for himself. And then Jesus shows up and says he shouldn't have doubted. It's frustrating to me for a million reasons. There's the totally human need to see for himself; there's the question of why Thomas was out and about while everyone else was huddled in fear; there's even the millenia-old nickname of Doubting Thomas that irks me -- after all, as soon as he saw who was there, he proclaimed "My Lord and my God!" I can get all worked up about this. Actually, it's worse than just a nickname. When Steve and I went to Jerusalem back in seminary, we searched for an icon of Thomas for a friend working at a church bearing his name. We could find all the other disciples, even the ones that barely do anything, we could find all the disciples and apostles and a countless pile of other saints, but there were two we just couldn't turn up: Judas and Thomas. Now come on. All that to say, I have some trouble with this passage, and this year, I've been trying to figure out why I'm so resistant to it. Like, maybe it's a reasonable thing to pick and pick at it until I can make it into something I like. But that might not be the most honest way to come at it.

Maybe there's something to what Jesus has to say. He's already told them, long before he met his fate, that Easter would come. They heard it and didn't really get what he was talking about, but they all heard it. And they've already heard Mary Magdalene's tale of what she found when she went to the garden, stone rolled aside, angel sending her away, gardener waiting, no, not a gardener but Christ himself, risen! They've heard that story, and they've raced to see the empty tomb for themselves. And they believed. And it freaked 'em out so much, they went straight into hiding. In other words, by this point, they've gotten quite a bit of evidence already. I can imagine Jesus seeing them huddled or hearing Thomas' question and kinda smirking. "Oh these Disciples. They never did get it the first time." Perhaps there's some love in his statement, his gentle and clarifying reply. He names Thomas' belief, and then he turns their attention away from the safety of this small room and reminds them what they're about. Jesus didn't teach and die and rise again so they could hide. He points them back to the world, back to their purpose, back to the teaching it's now on them to do. And he assures them there will be others, there will be new people joining up, and y'all are gonna have to convince them without my wounds as proof. And they'll be just as blessed as all y'all that saw for yourselves.

Y'all, that's us. We've all scoffed at something, at someone. We've all needed to see to believe, at least something. Even when I was helping my uncle build his house, even then I had my doubts about what that house could become. Actually, part of my doubt was that I was involved. How could something turn out so beautiful that I'd had a hand in making? And I wonder if that's where Thomas gets redeemed for me, at least this year. The Gospel of John ends with a line that tells you exactly why the entire thing was written. It was written, and I quote, "so that you may come to believe." "You" being all those who have not yet seen and yet could come to believe, if only someone would tell the story.

You know, I've had enough encounters lately with folks who aren't so sure about Christianity that find themselves here anyway. Maybe it was Christmas, maybe it was Easter, maybe it was just some random Sunday in March, but they came anyway. And I told the Gospel story and you welcomed them in and before they left, they said what I always hope to hear in this place. With awe and wonder and a touch of surprise, they say, "I never imagined it could be like this." And it's all because of what you've built here. On the foundation of Christ and all those who came before us, we've built something beautiful. I'm a small part of this, but the real work's being done by y'all. When people come, they expect me to say and do some stuff, but it's you that make it so unbelievably wonderful to be here. You show them what cannot be seen. You show them love and faith and,

against all odds and naysaying and scoffing, you show them hope. What a gift you've given. With the world doing all that it's doing, what a gift it is to provide a place like St. Thomas' where the tired, the broken-hearted, the hopeless can come and see - for themselves - a little good news. I'm relieved it's not left up to me, 'cause I never imagined it could be like this. But I'm so glad that, just like them, in you, I get to see, and in seeing, I believe.