

THE STRENGTH OF THOSE WHO BELIEVE AND THE HOPE OF THOSE WHO DOUBT

3RD SUNDAY OF EASTER— APRIL 26, 2020

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Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

I've been thinking that this COVID 19 pandemic needs a patron saint,
and I think we couldn't do better than Thomas Didymus, Thomas the Twin.

Thomas would totally understand what we're going through.

As Cindy said last week, just like 2,000 years ago,
we went to bed one night in one world reality
and woke up the next day to a new world reality.

There's a lot in common between Thomas' time and ours as to how people
go about dealing with the startling changes that come with new reality.

On Good Friday, 30 AD, the old reality was that dead people stayed dead.¹

On Easter morning in 30 AD, the startling change was that the tomb was empty.

Some deal with the change by denying anything is different:
remember, the elders paid the guards at the tomb to lie
and say the disciples came and stole the body.

Others not only accepted the new reality, but lived totally different lives afterward.

In 30 AD, denial and acceptance were two ways that humans coped with change.

On Friday, January 10, 2020, fewer than 1/10th of 1% of people who got seasonal flu virus died.

By Sunday, January 13th, scores in China were sick and dying from a novel virus.

People – including, at one time, me – didn't think was that it was that bad.

we thought folks were overreacting, and denied that anything was different.

Others said this was a serious global pandemic

and that no measures to contain it were too strong.

In 2020 AD, denial and acceptance are still two ways that humans cope with change.

Back in 30 AD, a week after the first Easter,

The disciples were split, with Simon Peter telling everyone he'd seen Jesus alive,
and Thomas was saying he wouldn't believe it unless he saw for himself.

Here in 2020, a week after the virus hit the US,

Americans were split, with some focused economic stability and normalcy,
and others focused on stopping an enemy we can't even see.

Yes, Thomas' dilemma was soon resolved, when Jesus himself came into the room.

But during that week BEFORE Jesus showed himself to Thomas,

while Thomas still doubted Jesus' assertion he would be raised from the dead

while Thomas still doubted his companions' experience of the risen Christ.

there was a split, there were two groups: believers and doubters.

As I've said before, the best synonym for the Greek word "believe,"

is not to give intellectual assent to a proposition,

but to put our trust in something to the point of betting our entire life on it.

¹ <https://www.quora.com/What-was-the-date-of-the-first-Easter-Sunday>. Experts argue about the date, but this is close enough for my purposes.

Note: Our deacon usually preaches on the Second Sunday of Easter, and just how many sermons on "Doubting Thomas" can one person be expected to give? So, we swapped the Gospel lessons for the 2nd and 3rd Sundays.

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For example, intellectually, the fact is that Tom Brady has the skill and experience to lead the Bucs to the Super Bowl; after all, he's the GOAT of the NFL.²

But I'm not about to bet my life on it. I won't even bet a beer on it. Sorry.

Thomas doubted, he didn't trust Mary Magdalene's and Peters' claims that everything was different now, that the obviously dead Jesus wasn't dead.

Thomas had decades of experience with death, when dead meant dead forever, like King David was still dead.

Why should he believe the ravings of other disciples, especially Peter, whom he knew often to have been impulsive and even clueless?

Yet, Thomas is my nominee for the patron saint of pandemic because even in the midst of the change, conflict and confusion, he refused to be like Judas and abandon his companions, to give up on everything Jesus had stood for.

Thomas MUST still have had hope against hope that some kind of good would come out of the nightmare of Good Friday, hope against hope that Jesus would somehow keep his promise.

If he didn't have any hope, Thomas would have made like a banana and split

Instead, he kept listening, kept his mind open, kept gathering with the others.

I love how the Collect of the Day reflects on this hope in the midst of confusion:

O God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt,

So in these days, these days we're in right now,

where reality is still unclear, where there are precious few solid answers,

St. Thomas is my nominee for patron saint of COVID-19,

the saint for those of us who hope against hope

that God is still somehow in the midst of all this and is working for good.

The saint for all of us who woke up in a new reality

and don't know what to make of it, but who can be

both skeptical and hopeful, both firm in our convictions

and yet willing to gather with those who differ from us.

In addition to a patron saint, we could also use a coach,

a guide on how to navigate these times of change, conflict and confusion.

The most obvious would be Jesus, of course, who gave his life

to change a world of violence, graft, and class domination,

with the eternal life, the power of peace, justice and compassion.

But even Jesus had a role model for living a world-changing life: Moses.

We come on Moses today JUST after

he has encountered God in a burning bush out in the wilderness of Midian.

Moses was a prince of Egypt who murdered a man,

and for years has been a fugitive from the law, hiding in another country.

Far from his royal life, Moses is now a lowly shepherd wandering in lonely hills.

God has a job for this Moses to do: deliver the oppressed Hebrew people.

Moses says he's not fit for the job. God says he is.

Moses says no one will believe that God sent him.

God says they will, and gives Moses some signs to use.

First, God turns Moses' shepherd's rod into a snake.

What does Moses do when he sees the snake?

What 99.9% of human beings do when they see a snake: he jumps back.

² I had to look up "GOAT." Greatest of All Time. OK, then.

Way back. Then God tells Moses to pick up the snake's tail.

Stop. Right. There. Pick up a snake's tail?

Remember that trust I talked about earlier? Moses had a decision to make.

To run for his life from this demanding, dangerous deity,
or to bet his life on God's promise to free the Hebrews. Gulp.

Moses picks up the snake. It turns back to a shepherd's rod. Whew.

Then God tells him to put his hand in his coat and draw it out.

Newly full of trust, Moses does so, and his hand comes out diseased. Nice.

Maybe he should have run.

God says do it again. Now, why on earth would Moses do it again?

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

What's going to happen now? Will the hand become a skeleton?

But, back to that trust thing again. Moses bets his life that God is good,
and sticks his hand back in and draws it out. Back to normal. Whew.

Moses now bets his life on God's promise to free the Israelites,
even though God's plan was pretty cockamamie:

God would send Moses to Pharaoh palace, into a world where things got done
through contemptuous pride, ruthless oppression, and haughty superiority.

In God's name, Moses was to tell Pharaoh to let his people go
to set slaves, all foreigners and nobodies, free.

It was a ridiculous plan, but if it worked, it was worth giving his life for.

Who better to coach us, Easter people, than Moses, who even Jesus quoted?

We learn from Moses how bet our lives on God's promises,
even though God's plan is cockamamie:

God sends us into a world that where things get done through
class warfare, relentless ridicule, and cynical consumerism.

In God's name, we, the Easter people, are sent to tell owners and laborers,
rich and poor, female and male, of God's promise of happiness for them
which will be found only in the abundant life

that God gives the world through Christ Jesus:

the God who forgives even those who deny him,

who gives hope even to those who doubt him,

blesses even those who have nothing to give him,

and who cannot be stopped, not even by death.

We, the Easter people, need to rely on only one thing as we bet our lives on the promises of this God:

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

Almighty and eternal God, the strength of those who believe and the hope of those who doubt, may we, who have not seen, have faith in you and receive the fullness of Christ's blessing, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

EXODUS 3:14-15, 4:1-8, 29-31

God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" God continued, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me.

Then Moses replied, "But what if they don't believe me or pay attention to me? They might say to me, 'The LORD didn't appear to you!'"

The LORD said to him, "What's that in your hand?"

Moses replied, "A shepherd's rod."

The LORD said, "Throw it down on the ground." So Moses threw it on the ground, and it turned into a snake. Moses jumped back from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Reach out and grab the snake by the tail." So Moses reached out and grabbed it, and it turned back into a rod in his hand. "Do this so that they will believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God has in fact appeared to you."

Again, the LORD said to Moses, "Put your hand inside your coat." So Moses put his hand inside his coat. When he took his hand out, his hand had a skin disease flaky like snow. Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your coat." So Moses put his hand back inside his coat. When he took it back out again, the skin of his hand had returned to normal. "If they won't believe you or pay attention to the first sign, they may believe the second sign.

Then Moses and Aaron called together all the Israelite elders. Aaron told them everything that the LORD had told to Moses, and he performed the signs in front of the people. The people believed. When they heard that the LORD had paid attention to the Israelites and had seen their oppression, they bowed down and worshipped.

PSALM 16

Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you;

I have said to the LORD, "You are my LORD, my good above all other."

All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land, upon those who are noble among the people.

But those who run after other gods shall have their troubles multiplied.

Their libations of blood I will not offer, nor take the names of their gods upon my lips.

LORD, you are my portion and my cup; it is you who uphold my lot.

My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; indeed, I have a goodly heritage.

I will bless the LORD who gives me counsel; my heart teaches me, night after night.

I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand I shall not fall.

My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also shall rest in hope.

For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit.

You will show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy,

and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore..

ACTS 2:14A, 22-32

Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared, "Fellow Israelites, listen to these words! Jesus the Nazarene was a man whose credentials God proved to you through miracles, wonders, and signs, which God performed through him among you. You yourselves know this. In accordance with God's established plan and foreknowledge, he was betrayed. You, with the help of wicked men, had Jesus killed by nailing him to a cross. God raised him up! God freed him from death's dreadful grip, since it was impossible for death to hang on to him. David says about him,

I foresaw that the Lord was always with me;

because he is at my right hand I won't be shaken.

Therefore, my heart was glad and my tongue rejoiced.

Moreover, my body will live in hope, because you won't abandon me to the grave, nor permit your holy one to experience decay.

You have shown me the paths of life; your presence will fill me with happiness.

"Brothers and sisters, I can speak confidently about the patriarch David. He died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this very day. Because he was a prophet, he knew that God promised him with a solemn pledge to seat one of his descendants on his throne. Having seen this beforehand, David spoke about the resurrection of Christ, that he wasn't abandoned to the grave, nor did his body experience decay. This Jesus God raised up. We are all witnesses to that fact.

JOHN 20:19-31

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"

Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

SERMON HYMN: *The Risen Christ*

BLESSING: The God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth, who walks where least expected, who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the distressed, and whom death could not control, now sends you out to announce with your lives that the Lord is risen indeed. Go, you are blessed in the name of our Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.