April 16, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Traditionally, the first Sunday following Easter is often called “Low Sunday.” This refers to not only the relatively low attendance levels that churches typically experience, but also to the pervasive sense of “let-down” as our excitement wilts faster than an Easter lily and we stuff our resurrection hope back into the tomb of life’s usual hubbub, as if to say that nothing of lasting consequence has happened. This year, however, has been very different.

Although we may have wanted to join in the magnificent strains of that Giovanni da Palestrina Easter hymn “The Strife is O’er, the Victory Won,” forced isolation and the pervasive presence of the shadow of death from COVID-19 struck a jarring note. And our sense of let-down is not due to the resumption of life’s complacent rhythms, but rather the reality that we have no idea when the pandemic’s assault will end or what life will be like afterward. Rather than sitting in pews as witnesses to an Easter spectacle, our unprecedented predicament has written us into the story in an uncomfortable way.

As we respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, we ask ourselves: was all this destructive disruption really necessary? What will our new “normal” look like? How do we cope with all this in the meantime? This is where that first Easter offers us a roadmap for what we are experiencing. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Consider the plight of the first disciples as they fearfully huddled behind locked doors in that upper room after Jesus’ crucifixion. [[2]](#footnote-2) In their self-imposed quarantine, the fantasy of who they wanted to be collided with the backstage reality of who they really were. They were terrified that they would share Jesus’ fate and had no idea when it might be safe for them to venture forth again. The only thing they knew beyond a doubt, was that it would be to a world that looked nothing like it did before. In the meantime, they struggled to keep themselves going. Sound familiar?

It is into this scene of fear and uncertainty that the Risen Jesus strode, incongruously saying: *“Peace be with you.”* [[3]](#footnote-3) And yea, verily, the disciples rose up and went forth to change the world…..uh, nope; not exactly. In fact, even a week later, things were not much changed. It is at this point that we can profit from the story of Thomas the Twin as we try to square the victory of God with the disciples’ inertia, fear, and uncertainty.[[4]](#footnote-4) You may know him better by the popular pejorative “Doubting Thomas.”

In my opinion, Thomas gets a bum rap in being presented as a committed skeptic and incessant demander of proof; as though he is somehow deficient in faith and lacking subtly in character. Nowhere does scripture say that Thomas doubted, nor does it say that we shouldn’t. Doubt is the inevitable companion of a growing and maturing faith, without which one has a naïve apprehension of reality.

Contradicting the popular image, we should note that Thomas is the only disciple in any gospel who affirms the inevitability of Jesus’ death in his decision to go to the dying Lazarus in Bethany. [[5]](#footnote-5) Likewise, it is Thomas who displays trust and courage as the one who would follow Jesus to the end. [[6]](#footnote-6) Finally, Thomas is the only disciple in John’s gospel to explicitly connect the resurrected Jesus with the God of the Hebrew scripture; the great “I AM.” [[7]](#footnote-7)

As you may recall, Thomas was absent from that initial encounter of the risen Christ with his socially-distanced disciples. We can therefore hardly blame him for not believing the unbelievable just because someone else – who apparently wasn’t much moved by it - told him. Besides, Thomas only wanted to see what the other disciples had already seen. It is therefore especially noteworthy, that when Christ reappeared and offered to let Thomas touch his wounds, Thomas declined and instead proclaimed Jesus as his “Lord and God.”

Thomas comes across as not only a quick study, but also as one whose response to the impersonal and impartial forces of death and destruction is grounded in awe-struck hope rather than abject fear. Rather than try to force the extraordinary circumstances he was presented with into the straight-jacket of his own attachments and compulsive ways of seeing the world, Thomas embraced a new realm of meaning and purpose. Gradually, and even haltingly, the other disciples would likewise enter into this new life beyond their own self-centered limitations.

When Jesus said to Thomas: *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,”* he was not directing a harsh comment at him, but was instead extending this same renewal (his “peace”) to all of us who come afterward. In this context, Easter is not so much an event we witness from afar as it is a hope-filled pilgrimage to discover our deepest selves, and to recognize, as Thomas did, that we share the same identity as Jesus. [[8]](#footnote-8) It is from this perspective that we might see in our unprecedented predicament an equally unprecedented opportunity to re-connect to ourselves, to each other, and to that greater life-giving Mystery beyond and between all things that we Christians call the Holy Spirit. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Grace and Peace to You,

Dr. Bob

1. Paraphrase of comment by S. Sorge in Letter to Pittsburgh Presbytery, April 16, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 20:19-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John 20:21 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Most scholars believe that the reading for today is the original conclusion to the Gospel of John, and that chapter 21 is a later addendum. Such would accord to Thomas a position of high honor, because John likes to frame his theology between critical “book-ends,” of which Thomas would then be one. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John 11:8-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John 14:1-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The only other person in John’s gospel to even come close to the same affirmation is Nathanael (Jn. 1:49) who also harbored reservations. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1 John 3:1-1; 2 Peter 1:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hebrews 11:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)