

Pragmatic Thomas
Preaching in the Age of COVID-19
John 20:19-31
April 19, 2020

May the God who....

I prefer to call him Pragmatic Thomas, Doubting Thomas seems so pejorative; Thomas the apostle is not looking for miracles, merely for reasonable, sensible answers. Thomas is the chair of the finance committee to every exuberant priest in charge. The priest has a vision, the chair of the finance committee has a balance sheet.

The word is out, Mary Magdalene and her companions have made it abundantly clear, to anyone who will listen, that Jesus is alive. Risen. Alive. Not dead. Not done. Not gone. Alive.

What Thomas knows is Jesus' body is gone, missing, stolen. Repugnant as that may be, the women are delirious, emotional, hysterical, misinformed and not helping matters. Enough is enough.

Thomas cannot hide with all of them in the upper room anymore. Can you imagine hanging out with the same people, day after day, afraid or unable to leave? (yes, yes you can, we all can.) So, you understand when I say, Thomas left to get away, to get some fresh air. When he comes back the story has gotten worse. They have all lost their minds.

Jesus is alive. He was here in this very room with all of us. You should have seen him Thomas...its' true. It's amazing! Just like Mary said. *You have to believe.* And there it is: "*You have to believe.*" To which our pragmatic, Thomas says, "Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

There was a monastery in Vail's Gate, NY a beautiful place with huge trees, nestled next to a ravine, with a stream, that I would always risk my life to hike down to the water's edge. It's not just the river I loved.

The chapel too had a hold on me. I remember being there at that monastery in the midst of a particularly difficult period in my life sitting in the chapel, as the people around me chanted evening prayer.

I remember thinking— right now I don't even have it in me to join in their prayers— I cannot pray because right now—I do not believe. I do not have it in me to risk hoping. I may long for something more. I want to embrace what they say, but I cannot. I can neither believe nor pray.

But even as I understood the truth, of my sad soul, in that point in my life, as I sat in the warm monastery chapel, as the sister's prayers washed over my head, and whispered in my ears,

It was also clear to me that so many people had prayed so regularly in that place that even though I couldn't muster much in the way of prayer on my own, I didn't need to because the place was suffused with sacred utterings.

I knew then that I neither needed to pray or to believe.

But what I could do, is what I did do

I reached out, and I held on to the flotsam of other people's holy offerings, I clung to the buoys of their prayers. Holding tight, though I did not find my faith that night, I found people who had faith. And in that time, at that moment, that was more than enough.

I wonder if that is what Thomas is experiencing. Thomas, in his sorrow, simply can't imagine that, not long before, Jesus stood where he is now standing. He cannot imagine the impossible. He says what any of us would say: "How can I believe THAT? Show me a sign; I need proof. "

Not that he doesn't want to believe, not that we wouldn't want to believe, but sometimes our souls are too empty, our hearts too weary to believe.

We have a choice. We can walk out and leave and say I cannot do this—I simply do not have it in me to believe. Or we can stay, still unsure, still worn, weary and sad, but we can stay and allow ourselves to be carried along by the faith of those around us.

Clearly that's what Thomas did, for the next time we hear of him it's a full week later, he's been with the disciples all this time with their experience, their faith, carrying him along.

Most of us at one time or another have had that experience of feeling as if everyone else has a tangible sense of God and we—all we have is our world-weary worn experience of just trying to believe.

Perhaps you may find yourself there now. That is ok.

For at other times our faith in God and in humanity is strong. We know in our center that the tomb is empty, Jesus is risen, and God is real.

There is for me at least, a rhythm to this faith business made even more prevalent in this COVID Pandemic of virus and fear. There is a rhythm of faith and doubt, holiness and despair. Sometimes doubt plagues me, sometimes abiding faith sustains me. These then are two parts to a whole— one vastly incomplete without the other.

The beauty is that we are not all in the same place at the same time. When some of us doubt it's the faith of the others that carries us and sustains us.

Just as the disciples carry and sustain Thomas. And when our doubt gives way to faith again, we then can carry another: the cycle continues, the ebb and flow, the water moving in and out.

And we need not despair in our uncertainties for part of being in a worshipping community, (And yes, watching this, you are part of a faith community.) We together, we hold one another's faith in our hands.

You holding me—me holding you. A group of people, in Michigan and beyond, a faith community that holds one another, carries one another, sustains one another over and over again.

Hold on friends, we've got each other to believe.

This day and the next.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Amen.