

May the God who creates us, redeems us, and sustains us, be with us this day, and remain with us always. AMEN

"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" (John 20:25b). Thomas doubts.

But I think Thomas gets a bad rap. Even today we say, "doubting Thomas" like it's a bad thing.

But we're living through a pandemic, a novel virus, and one that has the capacity to kill, and sadly has killed. We are living through something we never thought we would experience. The impacts have been painful, and I think we all can agree it continues to disrupt every part of our lives. It's important to remind ourselves daily to drop our expectations of what would have been "normal" for the day. It's a skill these days if we can train our mind to accept that life is not going to be how we had envisioned it...at least in the short run.

In the same way, the resurrection the Jews thought would happen didn't happen the way they thought it would. They were expecting the Messiah to resurrect and restore all the faithful at one time. And they thought it would happen soon. They didn't expect the one and only the Messiah himself to be resurrected as the full meaning of God's promised end.

This revelation stacked on top of Thomas having to endure Jesus' torturous death days before was enough to make him question what was happening.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit to some doubt. Doubt is creeping into my thought process and I suspect I am not alone. I think it's natural to say in these trying times, "I need to see God and have a tangible way of knowing God before I can believe."

Yet God shows us time and time again that God is there for us, even when we doubt.

Just where is God amidst the cancellations, the postponements, the disconnection, the boredom, the lack of technology and the technological challenges, the sadness, the frustration, the doubt, the confusion, the losses, the loneliness, the lack of income, the concern for those we know who are “essential” at their workplaces, the need to stay 6 feet away from another person, the need to stay home to stay safe, the fear, the anxiety, the uncertainty about what tomorrow will hold, the way Zoom meetings and Facebook live can be life giving yet energy draining, all at the same time.

I wonder where God is when we can't worship together. And when we can't visit our sick or elderly loved ones. Or when our people can't have needed medical procedures due to the pandemic. I wonder where God is when someone we care about dies and we have to have a funeral with less than 10 people all of which need to be a minimum of 6' apart.

It's the Easter season and we are supposed to be saying Alleluia! We are supposed to be celebrating the joy and hope that the resurrection brings. Yet, perhaps doubt has crept in.

Thomas is saying when he meets the risen Jesus, “this isn't what I expected...I need more proof.” When I think about the current state of society, I am thinking, “this isn't what I expected, I need more proof.”

The bible is full of doubt. Just prior to this we hear that Mary Magdalene delivered the good news to the disciples and she was not believed. They doubted what she was saying was true. Doubting is common. Doubt is a part of our humanness.

Part of being human is also to have someone to lean on when we need it. It's the need to know someone is there for us, even though we may not often call on them that is important. Like the card we get when we grieve the loss of a loved one. It's that card or message we get from someone that we don't expect with an expression of, “if there is anything I can do, let me know.” We know when that is genuine, and we may not always call on that person, but there is comfort in knowing that person is there. That is God for

us. God is there for us. God is there in the unexpected places. God is inviting us to come a step closer and to ask the hard questions. God is drawing us in, including our doubts and questions.

Thomas teaches us how to be human, to doubt, and to still have faith and hope. The thing about doubt is that it shows we have faith. Because if we question, then we are questioning our belief in something. So doubt is not a lack of belief, but a way to dig deeper to understand our faith better. For Thomas, there was nothing in his life experience to help him to know that Jesus had risen as the Messiah just then. Jesus wasn't the first messianic figure to be crucified by the Roman occupiers.

In his infinite wisdom Jesus meets Thomas face to face. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his hands and side.

This was a most unusual event, in the most unusual of times.

And today we are faced with quite an unusual time living through a pandemic. Even those who have reached 100 years old can't remember a pandemic. I haven't found a person yet who is still alive and can remember living through a pandemic. It's so unknown that we find ourselves caught off guard, unaware that this could happen and uncertain of how impactful it has been and will continue to be.

So when Thomas asks for some real proof of what is going on, I think I can relate. And I wonder where God is in this for me, for my family, for our St. Paul's family, for those who are sick, for those who die...and especially for those that die alone, for the African American and poor communities who this is impacting harder. I wonder, and I'm asking, 'where is God?'

God is reaching out a hand to draw us in. To encourage us to come closer. One thing we can do while we are isolated is accept the invitation God is giving us, like God gave Thomas so long ago. God is reaching out a hand, summoning us closer to grab on.

During this slower time, when we have more time to stop and to look and to listen is when we can take that step closer to God.

We have been under a stay at home order for weeks and haven't been able to gather as a community for over a month. Many of us are scared, are fearful, are uncertain of what will come next. Some of us know someone who has died as a result of the pandemic. I'm guessing most of us know someone who has fallen ill. At my seminary in Detroit where the majority of the students, staff, and faculty are African American, it is hard to find a person who doesn't know someone firsthand who has died of this illness. Deaths include the wife of the president of the seminary as well as two students. The president is also remains ill with an inconclusive test.

This is unlike anything we've experienced. It is traumatic. And studies have shown that in the times we go through trauma, our faith is often impacted in one of two distinct ways. Our faith can be lessened, the bottom of the barrel drops out and we drop away from our connection with God. Or our faith can be bolstered, boosted by our reliance on God.

We can react to our doubt by stepping or even running in the opposite direction of God. Or we can lean into God to work to find a deeper meaning of this pandemic experience based on our faith as we have understood it to be. And this unique time of 'stay home, stay safe' gives us pause to discern a new meaning to what is happening.

Now is the time when we can name our doubts, our questions and our fears. Once we name those we can give those to God. I know I have questions and I wonder what it is that you would like to ask God about. What is that burning question that you have for God?

Our God is not a disconnected, disinterested, uninformed God. Our God is one who loves us and cares about us and wants the very best for us. We know this because we are now celebrating Jesus' resurrection. We do it each year because it matters to us, and I think it matters to God. That connection between us and God is there for the grasping. And our new questions and thoughts that we give to God can yield new answers and new realities. God hears our doubts and fears. I believe they are as real to God as they are to us.

Society was forever changed as a result of the resurrected God, and our society as we know it will be forever changed by this pandemic. What doesn't change is the love God has for us.

Today is the first time we meet as a parish community via Zoom. And today is an opportunity to understand God's sacrifice for us more deeply.

When Thomas says, "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" (John 20:25b) Jesus responds, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:27). Jesus invites Thomas to come closer. Our God is one who when we doubt doesn't turn away from us. Our God is one that is there for us and invites us in closer. God has a way of showing us we are loved and God has a way of helping us cultivate hope even in the most uncertain of times. Now is the time to claim that hope, to claim that connection, in the midst of fears, doubts and uncertainties. May it be so.

~Amen

#Doubt #Fear #DrawingIn #Hope

John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter– Year A – April 19, 2020

St. Paul's, Jackson

Melissa Congleton