The patron saint of the Coronavirus

This week, following Easter Sunday, we enter into the Easter season, with readings that tell of how Jesus reappeared to the disciples and followers after his death. It opens with Jesus appearing in a locked room, blessing the gathered disciples with the words, “Peace be with you” and commissioning them with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the mission of forgiveness. It is reported that, quite naturally, they were overjoyed.

And then we get the story of Thomas, who wasn’t there that evening.

Now, traditionally, we tend to refer to Thomas as “Doubting Thomas”, largely on the basis of this story. I think, frankly, that he gets a bad rap. If we didn’t have this story, we would know him as he is described here, “Thomas the Twin”, or we might even describe him as “Faithful Thomas.”

The other story we have of Thomas is found earlier in John’s gospel ([11:16](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+11&version=NIV)) when Jesus was closing out his ministry of preaching, and was setting his path towards Jerusalem. A personal tragedy was unfolding, however, as his dear friend, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, was lying sick on his bed. There was a couple of days of delay, before Jesus decided to turn aside from his path, and to go back to Bethany to be with the family.

That was a risky proposition. As his disciples put it, “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” It sounds like good advice.

## Faithful Thomas

It was Faithful Thomas, however, who encouraged the others. Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” I’d say that gets him an honourable mention.

Still, this week’s reading puts him in a different light, and it’s the one we usually remember. “Doubting Thomas” asking for proof that Jesus really was alive.

Now, on the whole, I think most of us understand Tom’s reticence. Yes, he wanted verification. Most of the time, we do too. We don’t want to be blind believers. We believe in evidence-based decisions, we trust in the scientific method, and we want to test things for ourselves. That’s pretty normal.

And, face it, what did he have to go on at this point? The other disciples are telling him, “We have seen the Lord.” But they are still gathering behind locked doors. They are not witnessing to others. They are cowering in fear. They ask him to believe them … but they show no evidence that they truly believe their Good News themselves.

Would you believe a community of Christ’s disciples that are full of fear, that hide behind closed doors and within echo chambers of filtered news and safe communities? Would that convince you that they had seen the risen Christ? I don’t think so.

I wonder, too, why Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples that first night. In some ways, the tight band was already breaking up. There was already some distance between them. Perhaps Thomas just needed to get away from the others for a bit. Perhaps he was trying to cope on his own with his own discouragement and grief. Perhaps he didn’t want to hang around losers and defeatists and former friends who had already begun to turn away from Jesus (not just Judas, but Peter, who denied knowing Jesus just a few days earlier).

## The Patron Saint of Social Distancing

Thomas understands social distancing. Sometimes, we may need to be apart from one another. In our case, it is to prevent the spread of a virus. Sometimes, we step away from others in order to find our own inner strength and resolve, to focus, to regroup. Sometimes, we even distance ourselves because we don’t want our discouragement to affect others. This can be a form of blessed caring for one another, and it can go too far. Social distancing can lead to social isolation.

Many of us are struggling with that right now.

I confess, I really want to be in the company of church folks. I have connections “back home” but that is a long way away. My church family is important to me. I want to be with you.

And I need to let you know that I really wanted to start recording sermons in the church, but it’s been hard. I’ve got the technical part solved, but there is an emotional part, too. Preaching in an empty church makes the words feel empty. I don’t mind preaching in a small church, I don’t mind preaching to a small congregation in a large building, but preaching to nobody is … difficult.

I will try again, believe me. But it’s not the way I want things.

I do believe that we have a real gift these days in being able to communicate electronically at a distance. We have many ways to connect and communicate (this is one of them), and we should not take that for granted. I also have personal experience of how distance can be overcome through regular communication. My wife and I have spent much of the last decade working in two locations, and she has commuted regularly to be in Canada, but to do much of her work in Austria. For long periods, we have communicated through emails and chats … several million words have passed between us over the years. And although we have unprecedented access in our age to this type of communication, this is not entirely unique. You may have a similar story, but this is from my own family history:

When my grandparents were newly married, they were living on the West Coast of Canada. My grandfather’s sister contacted tuberculosis, and he was summoned to Montreal to be at her bedside. Just so you get an idea, that’s about 4500 km. Four times the distance from Vienna to Paris. It was several days journey by train.

Twice a day, Richard wrote a letter, and mailed it. His young bride Ada wrote letters twice a day, too. We have those letters, and they make a lovely story. Distance did not diminish the love. And they are pretty mushy, too.

But even though we can communicate at a distance, we are also an incarnational people. We celebrate a Jesus Christ who is not just risen spiritually, but in the body. So we can understand the yearning of Thomas … to touch. Not just to confirm and deal with his doubts, but to deeply, really, connect. That’s what we want right now, too. No wonder Thomas asks for something more.

## Where we Find our Faith

Even after the report that Jesus is not dead, that he is risen, that he has appeared to the disciples, Tom’s worst fears are confirmed. The disciples are still afraid. They are isolated from others; they are hiding. Every person around them seems to be a danger. They are whispering about hope, but they act as if they have given up entirely.

And Faithful Thomas challenges them. “Show me”. Show me, and I will show you what belief is about. But give me something!

And Jesus appears.

Thomas, bless him, does not insist on the touching he has asked for. He is content with less, and this opens up the blessing through him to others, “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe.” Because that’s a message of hope for us.

We all struggle with the fact that on some days, it is hard to see the presence of God. For some, the presence of a frightening virus challenges their desire to be hopeful and confident. Others find that their trust and confidence in other people is challenged by evidence of selfishness and irrationality. Still others are overwhelmed by the ache of others’ real losses, and real fears. These can be dark times, and it is hard to see the Light of the World when it is dark.

I get that.

And a faith that does not acknowledge real loss, real doubt, real darkness, is a faith that denies reality. And that’s not what we’re called to. We worship a God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ, who faced darkness and death and rejection and disappointment. We worship a God who blessed Good Friday.

And … we have a faith that says that death and darkness and a hidden Christ are not the last words. We have a faith that says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

And this is a faith that does not condemn moments of doubt or weakening of faith. In fact, Thomas shows us, even in his challenge, how to maintain a strong confidence that hope ***would*** come, that faith ***could*** be strengthened, that Jesus ***can*** be seen. Even in the moments of doubt.

There is a hymn that, if we were together, I would insist we sing. It was written by an Anglican priest, Herbert O’Driscoll, who I happen to love because he was my professor of preaching a million years ago. The words are not bouncy and upbeat, and it is not, therefore, the most popular of hymns. (Attaching it to a rather mournful tune didn’t help, I’m afraid). But the words ring in my head over and over, because it speaks honestly of the times in our faith when “feeling and faith are cold” but still faithfully asks, “Lord, let me touch you. Lord, gain my victory. Lord, keep me whole. Lord, banish my poverty.”

May it be so. We are not alone. We are in the presence of the living God.

God, when I stand. The suggested tune is “Abide with me”

God, when I stand, no path before me clear,
when every prayer seems prisoner of my pain,
come with a gentleness which calms my fear;
Lord of my helplessness, my victory gain.

When all my prayers no answer seem to bring,
and there is silence in my deepest soul,
when in the wilderness I find no spring,
Lord of the desert places, keep me whole.

When the dark lord of loneliness prevails,
and, all defeated, joy and friendship die,
come, be my joy, such love that never fails;
pierce the self pity of my shadowed sky.

When, as did Thomas, I presume thee dead,
feeling and faith itself within me cold,
freshen my lips with wine, my soul with bread;
banish my poverty with heaven's gold.