

Thomas and the Gift of Authentic Faith
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The coronavirus pandemic has given us time, some welcome, some not so much. We are doing different things with that time. Some of us, with children home, are teaching and working and cooking and doing laundry at greater levels than ever, multi-tasking on steroids in very uncertain circumstances. Some are hiking and reading and baking. Some are binging – all those cookies we baked, perhaps, but Netflix and Hulu and the like.

We are asking questions. Some of them banal. What day is it? (I've actually found myself asking that question!) Should I wear my gray sweatpants or blue sweatpants today? What about my hair? Should I watch "Tiger King" or not – if so, will I be damaged; if not, what am I missing?

And bigger questions. More serious questions. Will I, or someone I know and love, get the virus? Will I still have a job? How many will die? When will this be over? What will a "new normal" look like? What can we learn from all of this?

If you are a person of faith, or even a person who ponders these things, there is another big question. In a March 22 *New York Times* essay, the Jesuit priest James Martin asks "Where is God in the Pandemic?" Perhaps that's a big question you've been asking.

Martin first dis-abuses several possible answers to the question, answers I am sure you've heard at some time or another.

- First, the COVID-19 pandemic is NOT punishment. God is not a punishing god, he says, and I agree.
- Second, the pandemic is NOT a test. Why on earth would God test us like this, he asks, and I agree.

So...where is God? Martin says, simply and powerfully, “We do not know.” And further, he says, it’s OK not to know, and more authentic than a contrived answer that either makes no sense or portrays a God who is not the god we worship.

He then says one thing more. In answering the “where is God” question, he says, “look to Jesus.” So we do. We look to Jesus, who is with the people in their suffering, healing them, weeping with and for, showing compassion. That’s where God is.

And in case we worry that asking those big questions – and the big “where is God?” question – is a problem, that our faith is somehow less authentic if we question, or doubt, we only have this morning and this story and this witness – Thomas – to let us know that doubt is an important part of our faith journey, and that big questions – even with uncertain answers – lead us to deeper faithfulness and relationship with God.

It is still Easter in John’s gospel, the evening of the first day. The day’s events have been carried forth on waves of fear and joy and confusion and elation and pure adrenaline. The disciples have heard the story from Mary Magdalene and Peter and the other disciple. Frankly, they do not know what to think or do. They are scared to death, and they do what happens when fear sets in and human nature takes over. Closing in on themselves, hunkering down, they “self-quarantine,” though without much social distancing! They are fearful of the authorities, to be sure, but they are also fearful of the story they have just heard.

The disciples faced two fears – that the story *was not* true (which in some ways would be much easier) and that the story *was* true. They have heard the testimony, and though they remain unsure, they trust the messenger and are beginning to believe.

Still, they gather in fear. Somehow, negotiating locked doors and clandestine seclusion, Jesus appears among them. The good news is that now they did not need to fear that the story was not true. Their fear now focused on the truth.

Jesus acted quickly to reassure them. “Peace be with you,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” The one you have followed and lost is alive, and with you. He gives them a kind of blessing, and then a charge – “if you forgive the sins of any, you are forgiven...”

I wonder how it all sank in. I wonder if still yet they understood the message. This Christ would not rule over a mighty empire, or wrest control of institutional religion. Rather, this still-wounded Jesus would appear to a fearful, huddled group and articulate a revolutionary vision, peace and forgiveness.

Raymond Brown writes that “peace be with you” is “not a wish but a statement.” This is a declaration, Brown says, that the “risen Jesus (brings) peace.” (*Anchor Bible Commentary, The Gospel According to John: XIII-XXI*, page 1021) Jesus brings peace.

And he brings forgiveness, a two-way street vision. If you forgive, liberation and freedom happen, for both parties. If you do not forgive, whatever it is that needs forgiveness maintains its grip, also on both parties.

Just like “peace be with you” is not a simple greeting, the call to forgive is not a casual hope. Nor is it forgive and forget. Sister Helen Prejean, of “Dead Man Walking” renown, writes that “in our society, forgiveness is often seen as weakness. But forgiveness is tremendous strength.” This is a strength made real in weakness, a strength made real in love. As we receive forgiveness, from Jesus, we forgive, and our work becomes an extension of Jesus’ work.

Peace and forgiveness. Forgiveness and peace. The disciples need both, as do we. They remain fearful and anxious, afraid and uncertain. Though the circumstances are vastly different, the dynamics remain very similar right now.

Jesus continues to appear. He appears a week later, in the same locked-up room where it happened.

Thomas has become an archetype, the personification of a seeming deep character flaw.

And yet... Thomas had been out the week before, when Jesus appeared the first time. I wonder if he was out hunting down hand sanitizer for the group, or getting takeout at some no-contact restaurant! But he was gone, so that when he was told what had happened, he did not believe. He doubted. Like a surrogate for many of us, millions of us, I reckon, over the 2000 years to follow, he sought to see.

So that when a week later Jesus appears, bidding the community “peace” again, rather than castigating and condemning Thomas, he holds out his wounded hands and body. Because, as Karoline Lewis reminds us, Thomas was not really seeking scientific proof, or a doctrinal formulation, but a relationship. Which is what Jesus offers. Thomas believes and professes Jesus as Lord. Thomas’s question, our question – where is God? – is answered in Jesus, Gods’ incarnate word, who shows up and reaches out and brings peace and forgiveness.

Peace and forgiveness, and at a deeper level, a relationship where we can bring our hopes and our fears, our beliefs and our doubts, our joy and anxiety. Rather than being offered platitudes or convoluted doctrine, Jesus offers himself, his wounded self.

David Lose writes that "Thomas comes to faith because he first has the chance to voice his doubt and questions and then experiences Jesus for himself."

This is not blind faith, easy faith, but honest faith, authentic faith. Anne Lamott writes: “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.” Or as Alfred Tennyson said: “There lives more faith in honest doubt,/ Believe me, than in half the creeds.”

The stone was rolled away from the tomb once. I believe that Easter, resurrection, happens again and again, in each moment, in each life, even in the midst of a pandemic. Jesus appears in whatever locked room we find ourselves, bringing peace and nurturing forgiveness. And acceptance – coming to Thomas, coming to us, meeting the vulnerability of our humanity with the power of his love. Trust that. Still – a week later, and tomorrow and the day after. Do not be afraid. Be at peace. Christ is risen indeed. Amen.