

IMMERSED IN MYSTERY: A Sermon by Dan Stern; BCUCC; April 15, 2007
Acts 5 – Obey God not man; John 20:18-31; hymns 244, 254, 406

Sing verse 1, hymn #254 – “These things did Thomas count as real...”

I know ‘dead’.
I’ve seen ‘dead’ and smelt it almost every day of my life.
Disease and accident and violence;
So much brutality in this poor country,
 which the old ones call ‘the promised land’.
Death is the bloody monster which stalks & stabs & crucifies
Without hint of conscience or vestige of respect. /
He’s dead. / My light, my Christ is dead.
And the sooner we accept the fact of it, the better.
Not that ‘better’ has much meaning to me any more.

Sing verse 2 – “The vision of his skeptic mind...”

O I’d like to believe!
Right now, I would desperately like
To be able to say that everything is okay.
I hunger for belief as much as anyone.
Like Peter and the others I want to grab for the hope
that Jesus’ life has expanded beyond the grave,
into the whole universe.
What a wonderful universe it could then become!
O my God!
I’d love to see and believe!
Then everything would be going somewhere, and his God
would be eternally valid, and we would no longer be orphans
shivering in the eternal cold.
Then I would hold nothing back.
I would go the whole way with him.
Gladly! Without hesitation. Anything, anywhere!
But no. I must stick to the facts. All else is delusion, and
delusion is madness. Jesus is dead, butchered like any foul
criminal. I must build my tomorrows on the unyielding rock of
despair. That’s all I have. That’s all there is.

Sing verse 3 – “His reasoned certainties denied...”

O what an absurdity I am!
But just give me one fact, one incontrovertible fact,
Some sustainable evidence that shows Jesus is still Jesus
And my whole world would be reborn
And I would go to the end of the world for him,

Without hesitation
And name him my lord and my God!

- Prewer

Sing verse 4 – “May we, O God, by grace believe...”

In the Fourth Gospel, the simple, reassuring words, *Peace be with you!* are repeatedly spoken by the risen Christ. They are spoken to doubting, fearful followers huddled behind locked doors. It's understandable they are discouraged and afraid. Jesus' disciples too could be killed, or worse, left spiritually bereft in isolation and misery. But the reassuring presence of the risen Christ overwhelms their confusion, grief, doubt, and fear with a mighty and sustaining hope. They collectively experience the *mysterious tremendum*... the wonder that accompanies glorious revelation. No longer enmeshed in misery, they become immersed in mystery. Except Thomas, at first isn't in on it.

And you? Are you or have you ever been Thomas? Maybe you feel you missed out on others' firsthand experience of holiness and glory too – maybe it all seems to have happened while you were away, out of the room. Maybe you're the one who doesn't know how to believe, or how to pray. Or: maybe you are able, but wish you knew how to share your prayerful joy more fully with your friends or spouse or kids. Believing seems to come naturally for some of us. But maybe you live with and love someone who just doesn't see God; maybe he or she was never properly introduced, or kept bumping up against all the churchly hypocrisy and none of the real holiness.

If you wonder about things like these, Thomas may be your patron saint. His gift is his ability to sustain reasonable doubt and yet remain among and a part of the faith community. He wasn't present when the Messiah first returned. He missed that original holy of holies kyros moment. What others got the chance to see and hear and feel Thomas did not. And two thousand years after that formative, redemptive moment, that original resurrection blessing, many still feel decidedly “not there”. We may feel outside the direct lineage of the experience of holiness. We may often encounter others who claim greater firsthand knowledge of things spiritual. We may alternate between jealousy and dismissive scorn. We may wonder, is this all there is for us? Why does faith come so hard for so many thinking, questioning, and otherwise creative people? Look to Thomas, the questioning skeptic's mentor, progressive 21st Century Christianity's most relevant disciple.

It is appropriate that we live within the tension of having both faith and doubts. If we go to the extreme in one direction, we go to a brainless, blind kind of faith, a blissed-out believing in everything, a cheap grace, not discerning anything. If we go to the extreme in the other direction, we get into cynicism, nihilism, miserably not believing in anything. Thomas, said to be a twin, entwines both virtues: doubtful questioning and faithful believing. Doubt is faith's twin.

If you've ever watched TV's *The X-Files*, you're familiar with actor David Duchovny playing Mulder, the atheist who seems to have no problem whatsoever believing in the paranormal, and with Gillian Anderson playing Scully, the Roman Catholic believer who is also a smart pathologist, a rational skeptic of the paranormal. The thing is, Scully needs Mulder, and Mulder

needs Scully. We don't all think alike, we don't all believe in the same ways, and that's okay here, that's more than okay; it's very, very good.

Fact is, believing comes, for some, with a bit of a struggle. And it's difficult for some who were not raised in a church which took the broad view to believe a church can. But the cynics among us haven't been kicked out yet!

When I visited Berlin, Germany a few years ago, I became fairly well acquainted with a young woman named Jeana who still believed in the early, more lofty ideals of Communism. Her father, a minor official in the East German government, had also been a believer in Communism, but in a more established bureaucratic, autopilot sort of way. Jeana became passionately involved in street demonstrations for parastroika-like reforms. She did not intend to overthrow everything though. She confided to me that she would have rather kept Post-World War II Communist East Germany intact as a separate country! Radically reformed, yes, but Jeana feared full reunification with the West would result in an era of widespread Western imperialism – with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. Of course, reunification came anyway, and most rejoiced at first. But to Jeana, all the negatives she predicted seemed to be coming true. She realized that nothing she had ever believed in would ever again be the same. And at the point of despair, she had a deeply mystical experience. I won't go into all the details, but suffice it to say that she saw the risen Christ, and responding to that vision, she went off to Berlin to attend seminary. As it turned out, Jeana's passion for a classless society did not disintegrate, but got channeled in an egalitarian Christian kind of direction. A number of her contemporaries in the former East Germany, on the other hand, became neo-Nazi skinheads. ...As Bob Dylan once sang, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." Some kind, not always the best kind of believing, tends to fill the void of unbelief. And when things are at their worst, almost any god seems better than none.

Agnostic mythologist Sam Keen: "It is with some embarrassment that I admit that on certain occasions I have been unable to keep myself from praying. Like a shipwrecked sailor, I have hurled my petition into the void: "Almighty Father, strong to save, whose arm hath bound the restless wave...O hear us when we cry to Thee for those in peril on the sea." "Don't misunderstand me," says Keen. "I don't believe in prayer. I only do it. Or perhaps, it does me in spite of myself. I can't make intellectual sense of prayer. If the careless universe operates clock-like, following the lockstep laws of cause and effect, what will be will be—Que sera, sera. No willfulness or entreaty on my part will change anything. And if there is a caring, knowledgeable, and powerful God, He-She-It keeps His-Her-Its eye on the sparrow and surely, watches me too. In which case, prayer is redundant. Nor would any God with self-esteem need me to sing praises...; nor would a provident God, like a forgetful CEO, need to be reminded to intercede and grant clemency to some little one caught in the pain and tragedy that are an inescapable part of the human condition. Nevertheless: Thursday night (before Christmas) my daughter's life long friend Wiyanna was found unconscious and rushed to the hospital. (For days) she remained in a coma. ...The doctors were baffled. All we could do was sit and wait with her parents. As I watched our daughter, afraid and uncomprehending, holding the hand of her inert friend, from the depths of my being I cried out: "No! God. No! Please!" I don't know what I expected. But sorrow, outrage, and hope mingled and uttered forth a cry for mercy into the encompassing darkness. ...My spirit could not abide living in a world where science and self-sufficiency were

the last word. My spirit, like love, cannot be contained within the horizons of my mind. It soars above reason and swoops down into the chaos beneath rationality.” Keen’s daughter’s best friend got better, thank God. But we all know that she might not have.

“Doubt,” says the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran, “Is pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother.” So what are we to do? Maybe we need to find our twin, marry our complement, pray through the prayers of others who love us even though we may not believe the same way ourselves. The agnostic’s honest yet hopeful prayer may be: “I believe, help thou, my unbelief.”

The artist Agnes de Mille said, “Living is a form of not being sure, not knowing what next or how. The artist never entirely knows. We take leap after leap into the dark.” So too do a people of faith take leaps of faith. We have to; we can do no other.

Fortunately, many of us, like Thomas, get to a deep, real and sustaining faith through appropriate and reasonable doubt. Theologian Paul Tillich: “Serious doubt is confirmation of faith.” Doubt is contained within the divine pattern of life-death-resurrection glory. Doubting St. Thomas is an acceptable and significant member of the whole body of Christ.

One of these days the skeptics in and among us too, may yet cry out in amazement, “My Lord and my God!”

And led to the ancient yet ever-new baptismal font, we’ll all experience the *mysterious tremendum* of rising with Christ from the waters of chaos and despair. We’ll no longer be enmeshed in misery, but immersed in mystery. May it soon be so. Amen.