

THE SHOW ME DISCIPLE

You probably had never have heard of Anthony Fauci even four months ago, even three months ago. But now he is recognized by most everyone as one of the leading voices in the struggle to reign in the Covid19 pandemic. Dr. Fauci has served as the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984. He has become especially known in these past few months as being scientifically grounded. He doesn't obscure the truth as he understands it, and is open to the reality that things can and do change.

This past week he was interviewed by *Today Show* anchor Savannah Guthrie. She covered a number of the current issues, and ended with a question most everyone wants answered. "Do you feel[that] the worst is behind us?"

Fauci gave a long and nuanced answer. "Right now," he said in part, "given what we are doing, the worst looks like, for the most part--there are still a couple of exceptions, cities where we have worries that they haven't yet peaked . . . but if you look at metropolitan New York . . . there's no doubt that what we've seen over the last several days is a flattening out . . . Hopefully that trend will continue [throughout the nation]. . . . I am a cautious person, but we are seeing some light at the end of the tunnel."

"So," said Guthrie, "I think I almost heard you say perhaps the worst is over with many, many caveats."

Dr. Fauci laughed, understanding he hadn't given a clear cut yes or no. "Sorry Savannah," he said. (*Today*, NBC, 4-15-20)

Savannah Guthrie, and all of us I suspect, want a definite answer. We want something clear cut. We want something certain. But right now, we are not getting that. Right now, we are living in the midst of great uncertainty. We are dealing with something new--something we have never seen before--something we don't fully understand.

So too Thomas--and for that matter, all the disciples of Jesus. In just one short week, all their hopes and dreams had been shattered. They had followed Jesus into Jerusalem, waving their palms and shouting "Hosanna," fully expecting that he would be the victor in the struggle with Rome. But that had not happened. Instead, Jesus had been arrested, tortured, and then hung up to die. And the disciples had been forced into hiding, afraid for their very lives, unsure of what to do next, where to go, how to move forward. They were awash in grief and uncertainty.

But then on Easter morning, two of their number, and one of the women, reported that the tomb where they had taken the body of Jesus was empty. That was bizarre and disheartening enough. But then, to add even more mystery to it all, Mary Magdalene reported she had seen him. She had seen Jesus in the garden.

None of them knew quite what to make of it all. Were these the words of a hysterical woman? Or did she speak a truth so profound that it changed everything they knew about life and death? That night they huddled together behind locked doors, their deep grief and confusion compounded by fear that they too might be rounded up by the Romans and put to death. When suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, Jesus appeared in their midst and stands in front of them. "Peace be with you," he says. They had heard such words before; he had spoken them often before his death. He shows them his hands and wrists, where the nails had gone. And the wound in his side from the soldier's spear. And then he commissions them to go out and spread the word and share his message of life-giving forgiveness. He breathes on them. Speaks of God's Spirit being with them. And then, as quickly as he had appeared, he is gone.

The disciples rub their eyes and look at each other with questioning expressions. Had they all experienced the same thing? But how did he get in--the doors were locked! And, besides that, dead men don't speak! But each of them had seen him, heard him. Was it then true? Is he truly alive?

Thomas though, hadn't been there. We don't know why. Maybe he had gone out for some bread or wine. Maybe he had been waylaid by a friend or neighbor. Whatever the case--he had not been in the room when Jesus appeared before the others. And despite their insistence that they really, truly, had seen the Lord, he wasn't convinced. He was a man of reason, after all, he wanted some proof. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put . . . my hand in his side, I will not believe." (20:25b) Thomas didn't want to be caught up in delusional thinking. He didn't want to be caught up in false hope. In the midst of his grieving, he wanted certainty. Maybe more than anything he wanted things to go back to being normal.

And so, do we. David Kessler, a nationally recognized expert on grief, in an interview which appeared in the *Harvard Business Review*, notes that part of grief is uncertainty. Speaking about our current situation, he said, "We feel the world has changed, and it has. . . . [W]e realize things will be different. Just as going to the airport is forever different from how it was before 9/11, things will change and this is the point at which they change. The loss of normalcy . . . the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we are grieving." ()

So, what lies ahead? Is the worst behind us? Or is there more yet to come? Those are the questions that plague us. And those are the questions that plagued Thomas. Jesus was dead. The normalcy he and the others had experienced for three years as they followed him around the countryside, that was clearly lost. So too their connectedness as the twelve--there were now only eleven of them. Judas had already abandoned the cause and life itself. You tell me Jesus is alive again? Please, don't set me up for another disappointment. Don't make me go through another round of grief.

We don't know what happens in the week between Easter and the following Sunday. No doubt each of the disciples dealt with it in his or her own way. They must have vacillated between belief and doubt. They must have obsessively reviewed what had happened, checked their own memories against that of the others. But whatever the ensuing days had brought, the next Sunday they are together once again, and this time Thomas is there as well. For all his doubts, for all his uncertainty, he shows up for dinner.

And then once more, Jesus appears in their midst. Once again, he offers them a word of peace. And then he turns to Thomas. He encourages Thomas to do as he wanted, to touch his wounds, to plunge his hand into his side. "Do not doubt," says Jesus, "but believe." (20:27b) But Thomas has already seen enough. His fears, his doubts, are allayed and he falls to his knees, professing faith in the Risen One. "My Lord and my God!" he cries.

Thomas shows up one more time in the Gospel of John--he is with six of the others when they go back north to Galilee and take up fishing again. But note, he never does get the concrete proof he said he needed. He never knows for certain that the one who stood before him isn't just a figment of his overwrought imagination. There is still a measure of uncertainty here. Yet he acts on his belief. He steps out on faith, trusting that the love he has for Jesus and that Jesus had for him has transcended death itself.

Even the scientist must be willing to step out on faith--not meaning religious belief, but rather meaning trust. Carlo Rovelli, Professor of Physics at the University of the Mediterranean in Marseille, writes: "Science is not about certainty. Science is about finding the most reliable way of thinking, at the present level of knowledge . . . [A]t any moment, we have a vision of reality that is . . . the best we have found so far. . . . But at the same time, it's not taken for certain, and any element of it is *a priori* open for revision." A good scientist proceeds on faith--trusting that his or her understanding of reality is correct, yet recognizing that it may need to be revised, changed, corrected.

Thomas' prior understanding of reality was clear--people don't come back from the dead. But he revises that in light of his experience. Somehow, Jesus did. Somehow, love overcame even death itself. He acknowledges that and then he acts on faith. He trusts that his newly

revised view of reality is accurate. And he moves forward. He has learned to live with a measure of uncertainty as he moves through a completely changed life, a brand new normal. Trusting so fully that it is said that he traveled all the way to India with the Good News about Jesus and his way of living. Did he ever have doubts again? Did he ever face uncertainty in the days that followed? More than likely. Jon Meacham, in his book *The Hope of Glory*, writes: "For the thoughtful believer . . . there is nothing more certain than the reality of uncertainty, nothing more natural than doubt, which is perhaps thirty seconds younger than faith." (12)

So where does that leave us? As we move into our very uncertain future, what can we gain from this story? Perhaps this: it is not a sin to have doubts, to have concerns, to recognize that life is in a constant state of flux, and we must be willing to revise, adjust, change our view of reality. But despite all that, in faith, we can trust that the one constant, the one thing that does not change, is love. God's love. A love we see all around us in the lives of research scientists struggling to find a cure and a vaccine. In doctors and nurses and aides and others who care for the sick. In grocery store workers who risk their own health to keep food on the shelves. In truck drivers and delivery people who bring needed supplies. In restaurant owners who operate at a loss to assure meals will be provided for those who cannot cook. And on and on and on. There are signs of God's love all about us, if we are only willing to look and see. Yes, there is much uncertainty in life these days, but Thomas reminds us that one thing is constant, one thing is certain, and that is the death-defying love of God.

Amen

John H. Danner