

4.22.2018 Easter 3 (John 14:1-14)

When we sing that song of the saints of God, the message of the hymn is clear. In fact, it's repeated in every verse, and with three verses I'm reminded of Dolores telling the story about the veteran preacher who always divided his sermon into three parts. He described his method of preaching like this, "In the first part I tell 'em what I am going to tell 'em; in the second part - well, I tell 'em; and in the third part I tell 'em what I've told 'em." This hymn, in the first part, tells us about the saints of God and ends with the declaration: "I mean, God helping, to be one too." In the second part, we're told about the saints of God, and this verse ends with the statement: "There's not any reason, no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too." Finally, in the third part, the hymn speaks about the saints of God, those saints that we meet every day, and the song ends with this proclamation: "For the saints of God are just folk like me, And I mean to be one too."

Every Christian is called to be a saint, yet all too often hymns like these seem better suited for children, due to the fact that adults have spent years being first-hand witnesses to their own faults, frustrations, and failures. As time passes, it can be more difficult to imagine ourselves being among the sacred company of the saints. As we read about their lives, we admire the way they love and serve the Lord, but struggle to find concrete ways to make such a saintly life our own. This is a problem, and one that often leads me, as we discuss the Scriptures on Sunday morning, to focus on aspects of the saints that we can all relate to, be encouraged by, and then strive to emulate in our own lives. Remember, the word of God was "*written for our instruction, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope*" (Romans 15:4). Hope for today, hope for tomorrow, and in the words of St. Peter: "*a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you*" (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Hope and comfort were found in the example of the saint that we talked about on Easter Day, Mary Magdalene. Mary is one of Jesus' most celebrated disciples, a saint in God's Church, and on Easter Day we discovered that the Bible portrays Mary to be a person just like you or me, a person who, by the grace of God, found the healing and restoration that only Jesus can provide.

After her personal encounter with “*the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matthew 16:16), Mary’s heart was so filled with grateful love that she courageously and unceasingly devoted her life to Him. Her example of sacrificial, loving, authentic discipleship is simply a thankful response to the One who saved her. She was just giving an offering to God that was taken from the abundant gifts that He had bestowed upon her, and there’s not any reason, no, not the least, why we shouldn’t do the same. Clearly, Mary’s example was written for our instruction and our comfort, that we may endure as we journey toward the inheritance that is kept in heaven for every one of us.

In our second lesson this morning, Jesus said to the saints who gathered at His table for the Last Supper, as well as to us, “*Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also*” (John 14:1-3). By His Agony and Bloody Sweat; by His Cross and Passion; by His precious Death and Burial; and by His glorious Resurrection and Ascension, our Lord and our God (John 20:28) has prepared a place for us. Now, by His grace, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, God is preparing us, His saints, for the place that He has prepared for us. He leads us, one step at a time, and as we walk with Him, as we take His yoke upon us (Matthew 11:29), we cooperate with God in His work of preparing us for our future home by living this earthly life as if the future were today. The saints of God are people who live each day ready for the moment that we will go to Him or He will come to us.

This isn’t an easy task. Truthfully, it’s impossible apart from the grace of God, for none of us can make ourselves saints. It is God who is preparing us for the place that He has prepared for us. He reaches out to us everyday, in countless ways, and one way that He certainly guides us is through the examples of the saints “who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew.” Mary was our example on Easter, and our lesson this morning provides us with the opportunity to learn from another saint, St. Thomas. The New Testament doesn’t provide us with a lot of information about Thomas, but we are given some insight into his personality through the

inspired words found in the Gospel according to John.

There are three passages in St. John that provide us with certain knowledge regarding Thomas, and each passage provides us with an opportunity to learn about a characteristic of a saint. The first quality we find in Thomas, we also found in Mary, which is this: A saint denies their own will and courageously follows Jesus, no matter the cost. For Mary, that meant standing in brave opposition to the angry crowd, the religious leaders, and the Roman soldiers who would crucify our Lord. For Thomas, it meant following Jesus, even to his own death. When Jesus announced His intention to return to Judea to visit Lazarus, even though the Jewish leaders there were trying to kill Him, Thomas said to his fellow disciples, *“Let us also go, that we may die with Him”* (John 11:16). The saints of God don’t count the cost. They respond to His grace by plunging into the unknown, following Jesus wherever He leads, and all the while proclaiming the comfortable truth: *“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me”* (Psalm 23:4).

The second passage that we find in St. John that provides us with some saintly insight is the passage we read this morning. When Jesus told His disciples that He was going to the Father, and that His sacrificial death was their way to the kingdom of God, His disciples didn’t understand what He was saying to them, and Thomas spoke for all of them when he said, *“Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?”* (John 14:5). Thomas’ question reveals the honest humility found in a saint. The saints of God are finite, fallen human beings who understand that they, and their knowledge, are nothing compared to God and His infinite wisdom. Saints faithfully strive for knowledge and truth, while humbly admitting the immeasurable distance between the thoughts of God and the thoughts of man (Isaiah 55:9). St. Thomas is not too proud to admit his own ignorance and appeal to God for an answer, and when Jesus responds by claiming that He is the only Way to the Father, His words confirm the truth of that old saying: *“It’s not what you know, it’s Who you know.”*

The final passage in St. John that refers directly to Thomas is the one for which he is most remembered. After the Resurrection, our Lord appeared to His disciples at a time when Thomas wasn’t with them. When they saw

Thomas later they said to him, “*We have seen the Lord.*” Thomas responded to their statement by saying, “*Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe*” (John 20:25). Many have interpreted Thomas’ response as doubt, but I’m not convinced, because the saints of God aren’t doubters. The saints of God are those who refuse to settle for second-hand faith. You see, Thomas’ response can be viewed simply as an intense desire to experience first-hand the same miraculous event the other disciples witnessed. They had seen the Risen Christ, and this experience galvanized their faith, but because Thomas wasn’t with them, he suddenly found himself on the outside looking in.

Can you even begin to imagine how Thomas felt as he listened to his friends speak of their closed-door, face to face encounter with the Risen Christ? Hearing his fellow disciples recount this miraculous experience would make him realize his own need for such intimate communion with God. This reminds us once again of Mary Magdalene, and the very personal way that she encountered our Risen Lord at the empty tomb. The saints of God are people who believe that Christ is Risen because their affection is set on Him. They seek intimate communion with Him every day, by the grace of God, through the historic reality of His resurrection.

God is preparing us for the place that He has prepared for us, and on Easter Day we learned about steps that we can take to grow closer to Him through the example an ordinary woman, who loved our Lord in an extraordinary way. St. Mary Magdalene showed us the importance of walking with God on a daily basis. She taught us to kneel at the Cross in the evening and to seek Him early in the morning. The Word of God tells us that her example was “*written for our instruction,*” so I have to ask, did you accept God’s instruction? Since Easter Day, have you thought, even once, of Mary? Have you tried to follow her model of unceasing devotion, or is her saintly example like Easter Island, disconnected and irrelevant to your daily life?

Every Christian is called to be a saint, and this morning St. Thomas offered us another example to follow. Like Mary, he denied his own will to courageously follow Jesus, even to his own death. Today, St. Thomas showed us that brilliant theology won’t save us: It’s not what you know, it’s Who you

know, and once again, like Mary, Thomas showed us that it's not enough to have an intellectual knowledge that Christ is Risen. The faith of a saint is not meant to be held hostage in your head. Ours is a living faith in the Risen Lord, animated by love of God and neighbor, that bears fruit every day of our life. We are called to holiness right here, right now, and remember, that when it comes to being a saint, there's not any reason, no, not in the least, why we shouldn't be one too.