

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



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Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!



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2nd Sunday of Pascha-St. Thomas Sunday

April 11, 2021



Today we continue to celebrate the glorious resurrection of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ on the third day. He is our Pascha, our Passover, from death to life, for Hades and the grave could not contain the God-Man Who shares with us His victory over death. He has made even the tomb a pathway to the glory of life eternal. As He said to Martha before He raised

Lazarus, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." (John 11:25)

The Savior was able to rise in glory because He was born, lived, and died with a human body just like ours. When He rose from the dead, He did so as a whole person with a glorified body which still bore the wounds His crucifixion. Thomas doubted the news of the resurrection because he was not present when the Risen Lord first appeared to the disciples and said that he would not believe unless he saw and touched His wounds. When the Savior appeared again eight days later, He told Thomas to do precisely that. The Apostle Thomas responded by recognizing Him as "My Lord and my God!"

This exchange with Thomas reminds us of the profound importance of
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*** St. Thomas Sunday ***
* St. Antipas-Bishop & Martyr *

Epistle: Acts 5: 12-20

Gospel: John 10: 19-31

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to living out Christ's commandment to, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

St. Thomas the Apostle by Metropolitan Sotirios

Today we commemorate St. Thomas the Apostle's declaration of faith in the Risen Christ as his Lord and God (see John 20:28). It is the 8th day after Pascha, and is called "Thomas Sunday" in memory of this event. From what we know in the Gospels, St. Thomas was a fisherman. There is a particular mention of him fishing in the Sea of Galilee (also called Tiberias) (see John 21:2-3).

No doubt the Lord also called St. Thomas from the water to follow Him, as He did with Sts. Peter,

John and the others. St. Thomas greatly loved Christ, and was devoted to Him. When the Lord announced to His Disciples that Lazarus had died, and that He had to go to Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem (where the authorities were conspiring to kill Him), it was St. Thomas who said to the others: "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (John 11:16).

He was a man who would not allow anything to stand in the way of what he had to do, which

he would prove with his life. He was practical and guided by experience and reason, rather than emotion or sentiment. He was not satisfied with vague notions, but wanted direct answers.

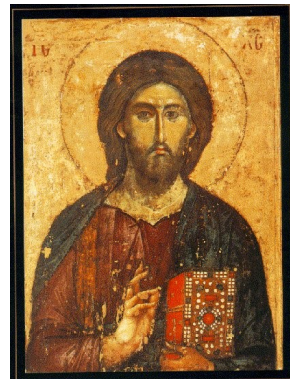
There are several incidents in the Gospels which illustrate this (see John 14:2-5). This is especially the case when Jesus made His appearance on the day of His Resurrection to the other Ten Disciples. St. Thomas was not there at the time. When he returned
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call Fr.

Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.
Glory be Forever.





Troparion to St. George

As the deliverer
of captives
and defender
of the poor,
healer of the infirm
and champion of kings,
victorious great
martyr George
intercede with Christ
our God
for our souls
salvation.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshiping with us today. Because of COVID-19, our social hour has been canceled until we receive further instructions from the Department of Health.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Louise, George, Evan, Ryan, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, Skip, Doug, Heidi, Laura, Elizabeth Matthew, Corella, Ron, Daniel, Frankie, Pat, Kathleen, Terena, Loretta, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ.

St. Gregory the Great on St. Thomas

Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. He was the only disciple absent; on his return he heard what had happened but refused to believe it. The Lord came a second time; He offered His side for the disbelieving disciple to touch, held out His

hands, and showing the scars of His wounds, healed the wound of his disbelief. Dearly beloved, what do you see in these events? Do you really believe that it was by chance that this chosen disciple was absent, then came and heard, heard and doubted, doubted and touched, touched and believed? It was not by chance but in God's providence. In a marvelous way God's mercy arranged that the disbelieving disciple, in touching the wounds of his Master's body, should heal our wounds of disbelief.

The disbelief of Thomas has done more for our faith than the faith of the other disciples. As he touches Christ and is won over to belief, every doubt is cast aside and our faith is strengthened. So the disciple who doubted, then felt Christ's wounds, becomes a witness to the reality of the resurrection. Touching Christ, he cried out: 'My Lord and my God.' Jesus said to him: 'Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed.' Paul said: 'Faith is the guarantee of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.' It is clear, faith is the proof of what cannot be seen.

St. Thomas Sunday, continued from p.1

to their company, the others declared to him that they had seen the Lord and that He is risen. St. Thomas was not convinced, saying that he would not believe unless he sees Him and touches His wounds.

Such skepticism from one of the Apostles may come as a surprise to us, but this doubt proved to be an act of dispensation by God, because it answers those who would dispute the divine nature of Christ. It is a rebuttal to the idea that somehow the Resurrection of Christ is a delusion or deception by those who were devoted to Him. The reality was much different, and it was not only St. Thomas who doubted. When the Myrrh-Bearers came and announced the Lord's Resurrection, how was it received? "Their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11).

This initial struggle to believe in the Risen Christ is an example for those in every age up to the present, who wrestle with faith. The Apostles declared Christ's Resurrection after

they had seen Him, spoke to Him, and lived with Him for 40 days after His Resurrection—a confession of faith signed with their own blood!



They were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, and martyred precisely because they proclaimed the Risen Christ as true God.

This was certainly the case for St. Thomas the Apostle. After his proclamation before Jesus ("My Lord and

my God") and enlightenment by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, he dedicated his entire life to preaching the Gospel of the Risen Lord. This mission brought him to Persia and as far as India, where many people believed in Christ.

His love for the sick and needy, combined with inspired teaching and amazing miracles, attracted many crowds. Among them was the Indian king Gundaphar and his wife. He continued this apostolic work into the years of the new king Misdeus, and the newly baptized included the queen Tertia and her children. This made the king furious, who then ordered that the Apostle of Christ be executed. This was done in the year 72 AD, when the king's soldiers led St. Thomas to the mountains, where they pierced his body with their swords. This is how the Malabar Church in Southwestern India was established, which is known even today as the Church of St. Thomas the Apostle.

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(Homily on St. Thomas Sunday, cont'd from p.1)

Christ's bodily resurrection to the Christian faith. Indeed, it is impossible to give a plausible account of the origins of the Christianity apart from the reality of the Lord's rising from the dead. He certainly died on the Cross, as Roman centurions were professional executioners who knew what they were doing and would lose their own lives if they let a victim escape. The disciples fled in fear at the Lord's arrest with Peter, the head disciple, denying Him three times. The women showed greater love and courage by going to the tomb in order to anoint Christ's dead body.

It is clear, however, that they all acted in response to His death and showed no hope of His resurrection. Remember that the idea that someone would rise from the dead was as outrageous, if not more so, in that time and place than it is in ours. No one associated being the Messiah with dying on a Cross and resurrecting. Since the apostles later died as witnesses to their belief in the Lord's rising, it is absurd to say that they had concocted the story. Countless generations of martyrs have likewise made the ultimate testimony to the Lord's victory over death with a strength and peace that are not of this world.

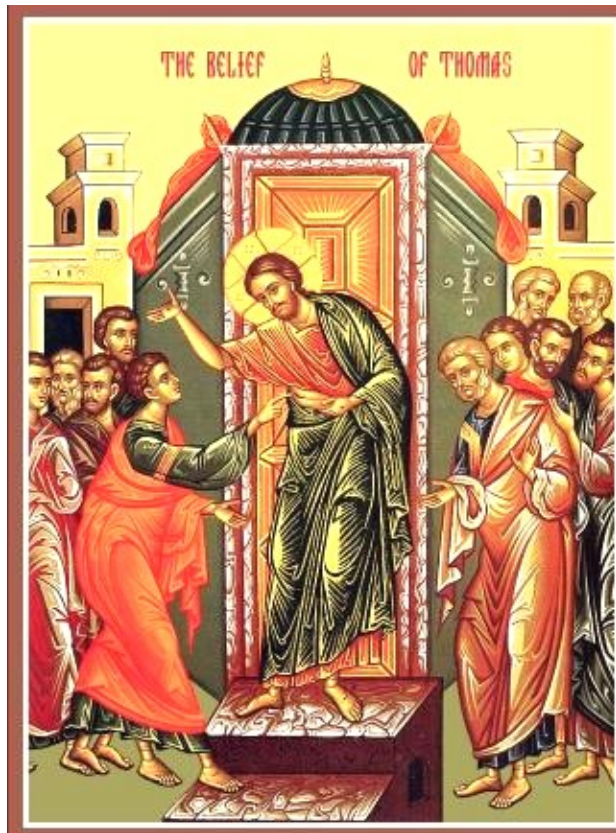
As St. Paul taught, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is worthless, and so is your faith." (1 Cor. 15:14) The Savior proclaimed His divinity by forgiving sins and saying that He and the Father are one (John 10:30) and that "before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58) The high priest asked Him at His arrest, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Christ responded, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14: 61-62) The Savior foretold His death and resurrection many times, though the disciples never got the point. If One Who claimed to be God was wrong in predicting His resurrection and simply decayed in the tomb like anyone else who died, the Christian faith would never have appeared. There would be no Church and no reason for anyone to remember Jesus Christ as anything but a failed Messiah with grandiose delusions about being divine.

Our faith is not in warm feelings or sentimental memories about someone who lived a long time ago. It is not in a vague notion of a dead person being with us in spirit

or in the abiding relevance of ancient moral teachings for our lives. To proclaim that "Christ is Risen!" is to confess the reality of the God-Man's victory over death as whole Person, of His bodily resurrection which is our hope for "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come," as we confess in the Nicene Creed. To quote Saint Paul again, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor. 15: 17-19) If Christ did not rise from the dead, then St. Paul was a fool for dying out of faithfulness to Him. He became a Christian only after the Risen Lord miraculously appeared to Him in blinding light on the road to Damascus. It is impossible to make sense of this Pharisee who zealously persecuted

Christians becoming one without belief in the reality of the Savior's resurrection.

Hope for eternal life is not reserved only for the coming fullness of the Kingdom, but also concerns how we live in the world as we know it with our bodies and in relation to others. Having been empowered by the Risen Lord through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the apostles ministered by healing the suffering bodies of the sick as they bore witness to the restoration of the whole human person through His resurrection. Even the pagan critics of the early Christians marveled at how they risked their lives to care for people with contagious diseases during plagues. They rescued infants abandoned by their parents to death, slavery, or other terrible fates, which was a common practice among the Romans to dispose



of children they did not want.

Because "Christ is Risen!," we must unite ourselves to Him in holiness in every dimension of our being, including especially how we live in our bodies. The more that we do so, the more that we will learn to see our neighbors, no matter who they are or what they believe, as persons called to find the fullness of their humanity in Him every bit as much as we are. The best witness that we can make to others is to become living proof of the healing and fulfillment that the Savior has brought to the world by offering His own Flesh and Blood. That is how He conquered Hades and the grave, and has restored fallen humanity to the sublime dignity of "partakers of the divine nature" through grace.

St. Thomas, continued from p.2)

Three hundred years later, in the year 357 AD, the relics of St. Thomas were brought to the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, to fulfill the desire of St. Constantine the Great to honor all of the Apostles in the capital city.

My beloved brothers and sisters, after the declaration of St. Thomas, which we heard in the Holy Gospel, the Lord replied to him: "Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). May we be counted among those who "do not see, and yet believe." May we also be with those who not only believe in the Resurrection of Christ but, as St. Paul the Apostle writes, know Christ and the power that comes from His Resurrection, bringing a new spiritual life (see Philippians 3:10). Amen.

* * * *

Saint Gregory Palamas is a great luminary of the Orthodox Church, who with the whole of his theology- the fruit of his life in Christ- managed, in his day, to revive Orthodox theology in all its profundity. It is said on the Holy Mountain that Saint Gregory Palamas' theology covered all the gaps from the past and the future.

The Athonite saint began his life on the Mountain at the monastery at the Great Monastery of Vatopaidi, being taught the tasks of the spirit and the ascetic life by Saint Nikodemos the Hesychast. Illumined by the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit, Saint Gregory acquired spiritual wisdom and became an outstanding teacher of the virtues and of the life according to God.

Following in the pure Patristic tradition, he did not accept a moralist view of the spiritual life, which some people were attempting to bring from the West and to project onto the sphere of Orthodoxy.

Throughout the whole of the Patristic tradition, it is emphasized that repentance is not exhausted by certain objective improvements in behavior, nor in external formalities and patterns, but rather that it has to do with a more profound and more general change within a person. It is not a passing feeling of being crushed by the awareness of

On Repentance by St. Gregory Palamas

having committed some sin or other, but rather a permanent spiritual state, which means that the person turns steadfastly to God and has an enduring readiness for reform, cure and engagement in the spiritual struggle. Repentance is a new outlook, a new, correct spiritual direction which should accompany people until the time of their death. Repentance is the dynamic progression from the unnatural state of the passions and sin into the area of naturalness and virtue, it is the total rejection of sin and the road of return to God.

Saint Gregory Palamas repeatedly points out this truth. "Repentance", he says, is to hate sin and love virtue, to abjure evil and to do good". It is perfectly clear from this

definition that the Holy father was unable to see repentance as a formal, mechanical change, since he defines it as an ontological renewal of the person. For precisely this reason, the fact of repentance cannot be objectified within the dimensions of an impersonal recipe or tactic, but is always a contingent personal revelation. "A person who repents from the soul reaches God by good intentions and avoidance of sin" (Homily 3, PG 151, 44B).

For Palamas and all the Holy Fathers in general, this personal nature of repentance precludes any of the shades of piety that the West has wanted to give to repentance, and, in consequence, to the whole of the spiritual life. The holy Hesychast stressed that: "Godliness is not in our words but in our actions". (To Philotheos 6, *Writings II*, p. 521).

But since repentance is the beginning and the end of the life in Christ and since it is the aim of that life, it follows that everything will be seen through it and will acquire merit or demerit. Even "faith is beneficial if people lives their lives in good conscience and re-purify themselves through confession and repentance" (Homily 30, PG 151, 185A). This in any case is given as a promise and agreement at the moment of Holy Baptism.

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