



“Thomas’s Proof”

Mark 9:14–24; John 20:24–29

Doubts? We all have them . . . even Thomas.

Last week, we talked about truth, the truth of the resurrection, revealed in Peter himself. Denier to Proclaimer. This week we turn to doubt and its champion, a disciple named Thomas. But before we get to his story, I want to take a look at another story about doubt, belief, and the hard truth of trusting that which we cannot see.

A Father and his son

You’d think that the Christian journey would get easier as we go along. We’d be growing in our faith and understanding as we come to an ever-deeper appreciation of God and his grace. We’d come to embrace the radical change that marks our transformation into mature disciples of Jesus.

But that’s really not how it is for many of us. With great enthusiasm we give ourselves to Jesus and are carried along by the joy and newness of it all. But then, as we start to take the Bible seriously and really listen to the preachers, we find that questions start to sprout up, good questions, important questions that challenge our still newly born faith. We don’t know whether to keep going or to turn around and go back, thinking we’d be happier staying as infants in the faith. After all, didn’t Jesus say that we are to come to him as little children? Sometimes it seems like it would be best simply to hide from it all, resting peacefully in our own little comfort zone.

I imagine that the disciples felt a bit like that in the days after the transfiguration when Peter, James, and John had been to the top of the “spiritual mountain” (Mark 9:2-13, the story immediately preceding today’s passage from Mark). They hadn’t comprehended the events on that hillside, but they knew it was big. So, imagine their surprise when they couldn’t drive a demon out of a possessed boy. Perhaps they thought they had come far enough with Jesus that they could overwhelm the spiritual forces of wickedness with the snap of a finger or the utterance of a few “magic” words. But, instead, things were getting harder for them and they had failed the boy and his father utterly.

So the father had turned to Jesus himself, pleading, “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” I try to imagine the look Jesus gave the father as he said, “IF?” But the father’s immediate reply is the most memorable part of this story: *“I believe; help my unbelief!”*

This simple plea, so heartfelt and honest, has drawn Christians to this man for two millennia. In those few words, he speaks for us all. Who amongst us has not struggled with doubts and unbelief? Is it not ironic that this famous phrase is uttered in the midst of a story about demon-possession, to which we are inclined to say:

A demon, really!? Sure sounds like an epileptic seizure. But the Bible says it is a demon. Jesus speaks as if it is a demon. Do I have to believe it was an actual demon to believe the Bible, to be a good Christian? Do I have to believe in demons? But, then again, what about angels? . . . and on it goes.

Sometimes I think that those who don’t struggle with doubts and belief don’t really understand the radically extraordinary nature of the claims we make. We domesticate Easter and lose our wonder at the claim of bodily resurrection. Even the disciples struggled to believe such a thing. Take Thomas for example – the most famous doubter of all.

Belief and Faith

We translate the Greek word, *pistis*, as “faith.” Regrettably, though *pistis* has a verb form, “faith” does not. No one says, “I faithed yesterday.” This is unfortunate because Bible translations use “believe” as the verb form of “faith,” even though “believe” speaks to a state of mind—including an opinion. Similarly, “doubt” refers to a state of mind.

The best synonym for “faith” is “trust.” Faith speaks more to matters of the heart than does belief. It is not so much, “What do you think?” as it is “Whom do you trust?” Doubt is a “head” word,” but “faith” is a heart word.

The truth of doubt

Yes, Thomas had doubts. Poor guy got the label “Doubting Thomas.” Big deal. We all have doubts. We are doubt-producing machines. And like Thomas, our doubts are reasonable. Think about it. We claim that 2,000 years ago a Galilean Jew died and was then resurrected to a newly embodied life. Not a ghost. Not resuscitated. But living anew, bodily, on the other side of death, never to look back. And we even claim that the same will be true for us all one day.

As hard as it might be to believe such claims, when it comes to spiritual and religious matters, it is really not so much that America is a nation of unbelievers; rather, we are a nation of *half-believers*, carrying around vague notions of our deeply felt spiritual hunger. Sometimes we believe more than we would like to admit. At other times, we prefer to deny any beliefs at all. One need only turn on the television or pick up the daily newspaper to find Americans awash in attempts to make sense of their spiritual desires. We are a nation in which most still self-identify as Christian, though many are really more “Christian-ish” than anything else, as shown in rigorous studies of Christianity in America.

In part, I think this is because we live in a world that values scientific knowledge as the only “real” knowledge, rather than

embracing science as a way of knowing, but not the only way. As I wrote about last week, too many people expect “proof” if they are to overcome their doubts. But outside of mathematics, I can't really think of much that we can actually prove beyond all doubt. Science, the source of most of what we consider proven knowledge, is not really about proving anything, only disproving hypotheses.

And so, with the boy's father and with Thomas, we stand there before Jesus. Like they did, we have a decision to make. Believe or not? So, we too cry out, “I believe; help my unbelief.” And key to both stories is to see that Jesus comes to them, to the boy and father, to the disciples, to Thomas (v. 26). Here is the answer to our doubts.

John's answer begins at the door we see at the start of the story. Instead of depicting a Jesus who opens it, walks right up to Thomas, and starts to argue with him by trying to answer his rationalist queries or assuaging his empirical worries, John paints a starkly different picture that tells us much about the unique character of resurrection faith and its relation to doubt.

John tells us, first, that Jesus walks through a closed, locked door to get to Thomas. It is not that Thomas's doubt drives him to demand answers from Jesus. It is Jesus who is determined to reach this stalwart skeptic, whom no one else seems able to convince. It is Jesus who refuses to let dead bolts or chains block the movement of love toward the one who lacks faith.

So too it is with us. When doubt crowds out hope, we can be confident that Jesus will come to meet us where we are, even if it is out on the far edge of faith that has forgotten how to believe. What a strange thing to hold on to—this certainty that answers to our most profound and desperate questions about life come not because we seek them with focused determination but because God comes seeking us, stepping through the walls that hardship builds around us, offering love at the very moment that grace seems nothing but a farcical ghost story told by not-to-be-believed friends.¹

¹ Serene Jones, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B*, 2008, 2, 402.

A week before Thomas had scoffed at the idea of a resurrected Jesus, saying he'd have to touch the wounds for himself in order to believe (John 20:25). Now—he can touch the wounds for himself. Now he *knows* as well as he can ever know. And his response is all it could ever be: “My Lord and my God!”

But even that would not be the end of the disciples' doubts. In one of the most perplexing moments in Scripture, Matthew tells us that Jesus met his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, from which he would return to his Father. He had been resurrected about six weeks before and had been with them numerous times since. Now, at this last meeting, Matthew tells us that, “When they saw him, they worshipped him but some doubted.” What!! Some doubted?? How could that be? All the times they had been with him after his resurrection and yet some still doubted. What did they actually doubt? Matthew doesn't say. I guess it is enough to grasp that doubt is simply *our way* and must be vigilantly confronted.

Twenty or so years later, Paul is writing to a Christian fellowship that he started in Corinth, Greece. They have given up their belief in Jesus' resurrection and, hence, their own. Paul can't bring them before the risen Christ to touch his wounds or meet him on a mountain, but he can offer his own testimony and that of others. Paul tells them that he, the other apostles, and more than five hundred men and women can personally attest to the resurrection of Jesus, for they saw Jesus with their own eyes. Indeed, many are still alive, he says, and could still testify to the truth of the resurrection claim.

So it was then; so it is now. We want to believe. We want to trust Jesus completely. So we confront our doubts honestly. As part of a believing community, we strive to understand the Bible and the essential Christian beliefs. We want to make some sense of it all. We put the work in. We discuss. And, all the while, we pray, “*I believe; help my unbelief.*”

God's Vindication of Jesus

It would be a mistake to see Jesus' resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God's power. The resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. To all appearances, Jesus' life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world “held him of no account” (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to vindicate someone is to demonstrate that the person is “free of blame, criticism, or doubt.” Jesus' crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel's Messiah. As far the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus' resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus' failure, the cross was the place of God's victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God's law court; he had been found innocent! And, because Jesus stands before God in our place, we too are vindicated, standing before God as forgiven, blameless people.