

## Beyond Doubt

A Sermon on Acts 5:27-32 and John 20:19-31

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Today's Gospel reading about Thomas invites reflection about belief, doubt, and integrity.  
And I'll say such things, but I actually want to consider the larger story of Saint Thomas the Apostle,  
and what his famed doubt actually led to.

Thomas doesn't have many "starring roles" in the gospels,  
but he is mentioned from time to time,  
and these speak to his character prior to what I just read.

In one, also from the Gospel of John - chapter 11 verse 16 -  
Jesus has decided to go see his friend Lazarus who had died,  
who he raises from the dead.  
The thing is Jesus had already made himself enemies  
and going into the city might prompt them to try stoning him...again.  
Some disciples try to talk him out of this,  
but it is Thomas who instead says "let us go and die with him."  
This instance reveals a bold man, a man willing to be martyred (he will be eventually),  
not someone who is wavering in his faith.



A second instance, again in John's gospel, chapter 14, verse 6,  
he calls Jesus out for speaking in riddles.  
He asks for clarification, "how can we know the way?"  
after Jesus had told them that they knew the way -  
and he gets just as much of a riddle in responds -  
Jesus' "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."



In my book, telling the teacher that he isn't making sense is itself a daring act  
(just ask my students how they feel about asking questions in class  
- few are willing to risk looking stupid).

But beyond his bravery, we see Thomas as a man who likes certainty.  
Perhaps this should color how we read this morning's Gospel reading,  
in which Thomas' certainty seems to be shaken.  
Perhaps he is unwilling or unable to force himself to believe something that:

## Beyond Doubt

A. sounds too good to be true,  
and B. relies only on the word of the other disciples.



### **“Belief is not a matter of choice, but conviction”**

- I first encountered that aphorism as a “fortune cookie phrase”  
that served as an epigraph to an episode of the Star Wars animated series *Clone Wars*.  
And it stuck, and often rings true.

I know speaking personally, I never really made a conscious decision to believe,  
or even try to believe, in all this “church stuff.”

There was a moment that I recognized that I believed it,  
and sure that was based in an understanding of the history,  
so there was never a time for me when I was going  
“I believe, I believe, it’s silly, but I believe” - like the girl in *Miracle on 24<sup>th</sup> Street*.

Belief isn’t a choice for me, but a conviction.

And it is that way for many people.

It turns out that phrase originates with Robert G. Ingersoll, otherwise known as “The Great Agnostic.”  
I don’t know it that makes you feel differently about it.

But it is intellectually honest.

There’s an integrity there, an insistence on Truth  
over simply what makes me feel happy or what is the most socially acceptable or expedient.

However. I must point out to you that this is a rather modern read on the Thomas story, and one that might not have made a lot of sense to ancient Christians. So am I taking you back into antiquity? Yes, of course I am that’s what I do.



First, it might interest you that the traditional iconographic depiction of this scene  
where Thomas goes poking at Jesus bears the title “The Touching Thomas” -  
not “Doubting Thomas.” That is, he is remembered and celebrated for  
verification, not doubt.

There’s actually ancient hymns about this story praising

“The WONDERFUL doubt of Thomas, which gave an unbeliever the  
knowledge of Christ.”

However you understand Thomas “doubt” - stay tuned - it is not necessarily a  
bad thing.

Jesus doesn’t scold him, the early Church didn’t schold him, so why should we.

## Beyond Doubt

And what does Jesus say? “Peace to you,” “Poke me” (I paraphrase),  
and “Do not be unbelieving but believing”  
And that brings us to this morning’s “that’s not what the Greek means!”  
I want to look specifically at the words that get translated as belief and doubt,  
believing and unbelieving.  
Πιστις and its opposite Απιστις.

The verb version - πιστευω “to believe” is indeed often used to mean to believe,  
but the noun and adjectival form we see here are more commonly used to denote faithfulness.  
It is often combined with the verb to do.

That is, faith is something one DOES, not only something one agrees is true.  
The two aspects here, of doing and thinking, are unified in the ancient Greek vocabulary.

So consider what this means for Thomas, for what Jesus is saying to him and to us.  
Don’t be unfaithful, but act faithfully.  
Yes, acceptance of this resurrection thing intellectually is still part of this,  
but if you believe it, you do it.  
It is a belief that has consequences. I’ll tell you what it means for Thomas in a minute.

But first, ready for a bonus “That’s not what the Greek means!”?  
The verb which Christ uses in his challenge “Do not be unbelieving but believing”  
or “Do not be unfaithful, but faithful,” probably shouldn’t be translated as “be.”  
The word is γίνομαι, which refers to a change in state of being, more “become” than “be.”  
Looking at the Greek, I don’t see this as a rebuke for what happened earlier,  
but a challenge moving forward.  
Further, the “imperfect” tense that this becoming verb is in suggests that  
this is not a once and done type of becoming, but an ongoing unfolding.  
Maybe conviction plays it’s role in belief of an intellectual sort,  
but how that gets lived out does involve choice, and continual choice to be faithful.

Thomas’ story continues beyond what we find written in scriptures.  
According to the surviving legends, the disciples gathered in Jerusalem  
and decided where each of them should go to preach Christ’s victory over sin and death.  
Thomas wound up with India, and it seems he did not want to go.  
In the *Acts of Thomas*, there happened to be a man from India who was in town  
looking for architects and carpenters.

## Beyond Doubt

Indeed, elsewhere in the historical record,  
Mediterranean style architecture was in vogue in India in the first century.



And Thomas goes with this man to India and is employed by King Gundaphar  
- who was indeed a real first century Indian king -  
to build him a grand palace.

Thomas takes the funds he has been given for supplies, and gives it to the poor,  
then proceeds to travel around preaching and healing and casting out demons  
- normal Apostle stuff.

When King Gundaphar asks if his palace has been built yet,  
Thomas replies that it has, and the king will see it when he dies.

You can imagine how well that went over.



It is no surprise that Thomas winds up in prison for a bit.  
But the king gets a vision of his brother who had died who tells him that  
there is a magnificent palace in the land of the dead that  
“that Christian is building for you.”

Gundaphar then receives baptism and joins the growing number of converts in India.

It is also said that Thomas finds three astrologers there - Magi -  
who had been to Judea some thirty odd years ago.  
And he fills them in on what ever happened to that newborn child they had  
been led to by the star.



After 20 years of missionary work, Thomas was martyred,  
\*perhaps\* by Buddhist leaders - stories differ on that point,  
having been stabbed with a spear on December 19, A.D. 72 and dying of his wounds three days later.  
The Christians in India refer to themselves to this day as “Thomas Christians”

I tell you these stories not only because they are fascinating - at least I think they are -  
and not even just because they flesh out the stories in scripture.  
But I think there is something to be gained from remembering that the story doesn't end.  
That beautiful exclamation, “My Lord and My God!” isn't the end for Thomas.  
In accepting that Jesus had been raised from the dead,  
he also accepts that commission that Jesus gave to the disciples,  
to be sent out into the world to preach and forgive and do the faith,  
even far beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire.

## Beyond Doubt

I said before that belief has consequences,  
and that the Greek idea of belief and faithfulness are inseparable,  
and doing that requires ongoing choice to act in cooperation with God.  
Thomas - the toucher - the doubter - did so.

There's a trend popular in some circles of "deconstructing" one's religious beliefs,  
that is examining them critically, questioning them, often discarding.  
There can be plenty of good reasons to do so.  
Yet, it is called deconstruction for a reason,  
and it is easier to take something apart than it is to get it back together,  
especially if you refuse to read the instructions or accept guidance.  
It is important that Thomas didn't abandon the other disciples when they started  
on their "resurrection nonsense."  
He really would have missed out.



That is the other reason I dredge up those ancient legends,  
to show that there is MORE.  
Because giving room for and digging deeper into the questions  
reveals greater depths than may be guessed.  
A lot of questions have do actually have answers.  
So let's not villify doubts - they may be opportunities to go deeper.  
And let's also remember that we can actually have integrity  
and deep interconnectedness between what we believe and what we do about that.  
Perhaps not as dramatically as Thomas the Toucher, but no less authentic.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us  
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,  
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus  
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*