

Blessed be the Name of the Lord, from this time forth and for ever more.

Thomas, like the other disciples, followed Jesus for just around three years – a short time, in the long view, and I can only begin to imagine what that experience must've been like. St. Thomas, the incredulous, personally witnessing the astounding events of Jesus ministry, must've been stretched on a regular basis – seeing one unimaginable wonder after another happen right before his eyes. Before Jesus called him to follow, would Thomas have ever expected to see the lame walk again, the blind regain their sight, the deaf suddenly experience a landscape of sound? Would he ever have imagined seeing the dead raised from their sleep and walk again? If someone told him beforehand all he was about to see, could we blame him if he said, “Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it”?

And yet, Thomas followed Jesus, and lived to testify to events that defy belief – truly, he saw miracles that – if I were honest – might cause me to question my own perceptions – my own grasp on reality. [rub ears and eyes] Are these things working correctly? Thomas witnessed ever growing crowds of people healed and set free from all manner of sicknesses and spiritual illness – and then one day, Thomas stood with Jesus, outside the burial place of a dear friend, and saw Jesus – weeping – raise a man who had been dead and buried already for four full days. At this point, whether Thomas believed his own eyes and ears or not became a moot point, because these amazing and awesome events were now a part of his own story. They turned from fantastic to factual, on the merits of the evidence right in front of him.

If Thomas said, yeah, I know what I think I saw, but I just can't accept that a person stooped over is now free from pain and standing straight; or I can't accept that our friend Lazarus is back from the dead – because let's face it, these things go against everything we know about how the universe works...well, it wouldn't matter, ultimately, because there's the healed woman standing up straight and free from pain; and here's Lazarus, sitting at the dinner table with them. At some point, Thomas would need to set aside his skepticism, confronted with these wonders that now became fact – Thomas would move from a place of doubt to a place of certainty.

There is a comfort, for me, in knowing that all these centuries ago, the evangelist John included this encounter between Jesus and Thomas as he composed his gospel account. As someone who struggles in this place between doubt and belief – sometimes deeply, sometimes temporarily – feeling the inadequacy of my own faith in certain times and seasons. If the standard for faith in Jesus Christ is feeling a confident certainty all the time, then my faith can never quite live up to that bar. In a sense, then, that's why we need each other – staying in relationship with one another, sharing in this community of the church together – to have any chance at growing in faith. It's as though John, some two thousand years ago, knew deeply the struggle between doubt and belief, and wanted us to know it was okay. Thomas, so often denigrated as the “doubter” – as though doubt were somehow a marker of weakness or a sign of watered-down faith – is actually the only person in all of the Gospels to call Jesus not only Lord but “my Lord and MY GOD.”

So when Thomas finds out that Jesus has been arrested, put to trial, murdered, and buried in a tomb, we can understand why he might be caught in a moment of grief. After all, taking account of all available evidence, Thomas might be forgiven for assuming that all is lost – that his rabbi and friend and teacher is dead, and the life he's lived following him has ended. More than that, though, when Thomas hears his friends speak about seeing Jesus alive, in the flesh, can we really blame him for saying, “yeah, show me the wounds...if I can verify this personally – I want to see the holes from the nails, guys – then I will believe that he has been raised. Only then.”

And the risen Christ appears to him, in this story from John's gospel, and is known to Thomas by the wounds in his hands and in his side. When all is said and done, it seems Thomas didn't actually go through with verifying the wounds forensically – there is something so vivid about the idea of verifying nail wounds by feeling them rather than just seeing them – and he makes his profound confession – “My Lord and my God!” Jesus uses this as a teaching moment – and says, reject faithlessness, Thomas, and choose believing. Thomas, Jesus says, you enjoy the benefit of having been presented with the factual evidence of my resurrection, you can verify this yourself. But so many others will not share this luxury – they will never have seen me alive or dead or resurrected. And they who have not seen me yet choose to place faith in me – they will be blessed. They have not seen yet they believe. When Jesus said that, he was quite likely thinking of people like you and me – this, a love letter, sent through time, to us, specifically.

Later on in John's gospel, he writes: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written

so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” In our present age, with so much information available at the ready, and so much coming at us at every moment, it’s sometimes hard to separate the fact from the fiction, to find the truth in all of the noise. It’s hard to know at times if what we believe is something we’ve inherited, or something we’ve chosen; is belief something that happens to us? Or is it something that we have some hand in formulating? As post-enlightenment people, we value our skepticism, and we see it as an essential tool in arriving at some understanding of the truth, however tenuous that might be in the moment.

And yet, when Jesus talks here about belief, he is not describing assent to a set of propositions. Believing in Jesus Christ is not about accepting or even being personally convinced of a checklist of assertions about the universe. If belief in Jesus was a matter of ticking off all the right boxes on a list of required beliefs, then quite likely none of us would ever live up to that standard. For Jesus, believing was about staying in relationship with him – continuing to follow even when contending with human tendency to doubt. And that through the daily entering into this relationship – conversion as a daily practice – the understanding and surety in faith follows. We have convinced ourselves, to some extent, that the human brain is a computer – and that logic proceeds from assessment of the right data. Once we have all the facts, then we can proceed with a theory.

Jesus proposes another way: believe in me. Enter into a relationship with me. Seek me, day by day. Doubt is not the opposite of faith. For us, the certainty of

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faith can not precede belief, but follows it – faith as a journey that one chooses, nurtures, and continually engages.

The mystery of faith is a journey with a destination. The mystery of faith is a matter of progress, and not of momentary perfection. The mystery of faith is this: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Amen.