

Doubt, Belief, Faith, Action

Russ' Sermon - April 11, 2021

John 20:29-31

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Jesus and Thomas

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

The Purpose of This Book

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.

Please pray with me.

Gracious God, be with us today as we hear the story of Doubting Thomas and consider the notions of doubt, belief, faith and action. Let your voice be heard through these words and inspire us to do your will. Amen.

Have you ever doubted that something happened when you didn't see or experience it for yourself?

I have.

Have you ever felt doubts about yourself?

All the time for me.

Have you ever doubted that Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead?

Lately this has seemed a distant reality for me.

Have you ever questioned your faith?

I have, certainly.

What did you do about it?

Doubt: Some definitions from Dictionary.com

Verb:

1 to be uncertain about; consider questionable or unlikely; hesitate to believe.

2 to distrust; regard with suspicion.

3 *Archaic. to fear; be apprehensive about.*

Verb without object:

4 to be uncertain about something; be undecided in opinion or belief

Noun:

5 a feeling of uncertainty about the truth, reality, or nature of something.

6 distrust or suspicion.

7 a general feeling of uncertainty, worry, or concern

8 a state of affairs such as to occasion uncertainty.

9 *Obs. Fear, dread.*

George Fox, the "founder" of Quakerism, certainly had doubts about the religious establishment of his time. He was a seeker of truth, and investigated the various religious entities, the Church of England and the various Separatist groups of his time, for his spiritual needs. Not finding it, he sought for answers within and was led to "truth" through his own experience. Here is a famous quote:

Now after I had received that opening from the Lord that to be bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not sufficient to fit a man to be a minister of Christ, I regarded the priests less and looked more after the dissenting people... As I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition', and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus, when God doth work who shall let [i.e. hinder] it? And this I knew experimentally.

George Fox, Journal, 1647

Fox was certainly grounded in the scriptures and the teaching of Jesus. How about you?

We Friends speak about knowing God/Jesus through our own direct experience. Can one experience Jesus without reading or hearing his story or his teachings? How can one follow God/Jesus' teachings unless they have been read or heard?

Imagine yourself as a seeker of answers to your spiritual questions who has never encountered Christian scriptures. How would you encounter the "truth" that Christians, even Friends seek?

Here is what we know about Thomas:

John 11:11:16

[Jesus said to his disciples] 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹²The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

John 14:1-13

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.' ⁵Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' ⁶Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

⁸ Philip said to him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.' ⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"? ¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

John 20:24-29

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Why was Thomas not present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples after his resurrection? Maybe he was working. I wonder if Thomas was an introvert with anxiety issues. Maybe he was feeling depressed or anxious, and couldn't face the loss of his teacher and friend. Maybe he was a Quaker and didn't know it and he just needed to understand life from his own direct experience. [Do you suppose he was an ancestor of persons from Missouri - the "show me" state, "skeptical of the matter and not easily convinced."]

SO, TAKING SOMETHING ON FAITH.

"To accept something without further verifying or investigating, based on trust." [The Free [dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)]

Some might say that the Biblical account of God/Jesus is a myth, "a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. [Google Dictionary]. One might also describe it as a 'faith story.' If one accepts it in this way, it does not matter whether the words or events literally happened. The stories and teachings contain spiritual truths that can speak directly to individuals.

RUSS' WITNESS

Much of the activity of my life has been based on the notion of a vocation for ministry, specifically music ministry. To a certain extent, I have taken the Biblical witness as a faith story: that it matters not if certain things literally happened according to the literal meaning of the words in the book. I admit that I have a certain skepticism that the entire Bible is relevant to my own spiritual experience. However, the stories and teachings of the Gospels, in particular, speak to me when I hear them. At times, I miss the reading of all of the passages of the Common Lectionary which, over three years, cover the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, most of the Psalms, and much of the Old Testament and Epistles of Paul and others.

Hearing the teachings of Jesus (and his references to the Torah and Prophets) can inspire me to conduct myself in positive ways and to take action to help others at times. Lately, I have missed hearing the Gospel passages about Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection as our focus has been on other texts. Perhaps I am like Thomas, that I need touch to feel "the presence of God." Direct experience. Perhaps this last year of isolation accounts for my feeling of disconnection with the Gospel stories that feed my faith.

How do you encounter God/Jesus? How do you feel God's presence? Do you need to touch Jesus' wounds in order to believe? Do you take his teachings on faith, based on trust that those who have gone before you have known and taught you the truth? Is it even important to have a confident faith?

Here is one person's thoughts about certainty:

Some among us have a clear sense of what is right and wrong - for themselves personally if not for everyone else. They have a reassuring certitude and steadiness which can serve as a reference point by which others may navigate. There are others who live in a state of uncertainty, constantly re-thinking their responses to changing circumstances, trying to hold onto what seems fundamental but impelled to reinterpret, often even unsure where lies the boundary between the fundamental and the interpretation...

Please be patient, those of you who have found a rock to stand on, with those of us who haven't and with those of us who are not even looking for one. We live on the wave's edge, where seal, sand and sky are all mixed up together: we are tossed head over heels in the surf, catching only occasional glimpses of any fixed horizon. Some of us stay there from choice because it is exciting and it feels like the right place to be. Philip Rack, 1979

Perhaps you find yourself in this sort of place in your faith journey.

TAKING ACTION

Quakers are known for taking action to help people (service), to further the notions of equality, truth-telling (integrity), living simply and peacefully, and for enlarging the Blessed Community in the world.. Why do we do this? What is the basis for these activities? For George Fox and other early Friends it was teachings of Jesus that prompted their actions. What about you? What is your prompt? Does your faith call you to take action? What can you DO in response to the love of God/Jesus?

IDEAS

Attend Meeting for Worship. Read your Bible. Join a Sunday school class. Stand up for someone. Respect all persons. Write a letter to your Congress representatives. Help a homeless person with a meal or a kind word. Say a friendly hello to a stranger.

Maybe, during times of doubt, we are to just persist in our belief, our faith, and in our actions. I wish you well in your journeys of doubt, belief, faith and action.

LITTLE SONG HERE:

Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief, help thou my unbelief.

Give me a faith that leads to action, that leads to action.