

1 Peter 1:3-9
John 20:19-31

Faith, or Certitude?
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
J. Shannon Webster

30 March 2008
Easter 2

One of Mark Twain's characters said: "*Faith is believing what you know ain't so.*"ⁱ While that has a clever ring to it, that is pretty clearly not an adequate description of faith. It would be more accurate to say faith is trusting that what you most deeply hope is so.

A little of both of those definitions may have been working in Thomas – he wasn't going to believe until he knew it *was* so. The disciple Thomas wasn't there when the rest were huddled in fear behind locked doors, and Jesus appeared suddenly. There they received a commissioning – "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And he breathed on them, saying "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is the *ruah* (in Hebrew) – the Spirit that moved over the waters when God created the world, the Spirit that would later come to the church at Pentecost, the breath of life.

I can understand why Thomas didn't believe this, when the others told him, "We have seen the Lord," they said. "Yeah, right." "No, really." "I'll believe it when I touch the nail marks and put my hand in the wound on his side," answered Thomas. This episode earned him the moniker, "Doubting Thomas," and he has even been said to be the patron saint of those who missed church only to be told, "It was a great service last Sunday; you shoulda been there." All that may be unfair to Thomas. I have a preacher friend, Christina Berry, who thinks he may have run down to the store with a shopping list from the other guys, and points out he seems to have been the only one not afraid to go outside! And Christians in India do consider Thomas to be their patron saint, the one who evangelized India, as tradition has it.

It is a graphic story, and a bit grisly, sticking hands into wounds and feeling of nail holes in human flesh. I want us to pursue 2 things with this text – first what the gospel-writer John wants us to know in telling this story, and second, the question of Thomas's faith.

John's gospel was written at a time when there were two versions of Christianity emerging, and competing to become the dominant narrative. One is the version we more or less know. The other was the Gnostic version – mystics and dualists who saw this world as only a pale reflection of a war between good and evil being played out in an otherworldly realm. Everything physical was impure and unholy, spiritual things were good but were not found in the physical realm. One version of this gnosis (secret knowledge) were the Docetists, who believed that since Jesus was divine, the Son of God, there was nothing physical or human about him. It just seemed that way. They denied his humanity and said his physical body was an illusion, as was the resurrection. God could not really suffer, they said.

The counter to this, as the Gospel of John tells it, is this very physical, visceral, graphic post-resurrection appearance by Jesus. Even the Risen Christ still carries the wounds of crucifixion in his hands and side, and Thomas can touch them if he wants to. The crucifixion was a real death of a real human being. Jesus wasn't just going through the motions.

Why does this matter to us today, this physicality of the Risen Christ? It is a caution to us against over-spiritualizing the Gospel. Christianity has been guilty of that sometimes. Gnosticism will be with us always (“*Old heresies never die; they just change address.*”ⁱⁱⁱ) We have read in scripture that we are to care for the poor, and said that it only means the ‘poor in spirit’ and that we are to love our neighbors or our enemies and said that only meant if they were other Christians. But Jesus says, “Put your finger here, and see my hands.”

So what about Thomas? He does demand reality he can touch, the physicality of Jesus Risen and not yet ascended. That's a luxury we don't have, so there is some comfort for us, perhaps, when John records Jesus saying “*Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

The word translated here “believe” is from the Greek πιστις (pistis), which has the sense of *faith*, or *trust*. Let's say a word in defense of Thomas's famous doubt. When Jesus appeared to him as well, a week later, and offered his physical wounds as evidence – “*Put your finger here; touch the wound in my side*” – Thomas did not reach out and touch. He didn't have to. He makes a confession of faith – “My Lord and my God.”

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. It is probably a component of it. I would say fear is the opposite of faith. Faith is not certitude. Certitude of belief is based on my own convictions, and faith comes from somewhere else, as a gift.

In the epistle from Peter we read this morning, Peter describes it as a gift from God, through Jesus Christ, that keeps believers for the last time – the fulfillment to which history is moving. We may hear TV preachers claim that if your faith is strong enough you'll get whatever you pray for, or that nothing will happen to you. But this scripture shows Peter knows faith will not make Christians perfect, and won't protect them from trouble (“*the genuineness of your faith is tested by fire*”), but it will get them through it. The danger is that troubles may shake the faith of Christians, making them think something is wrong with them even if nothing is, and Peter recounts those same words of Jesus, in a way, “*Although you have not seen him, you love him; though you don't see him now, you believe.*” Faith points to the promised end that is not yet, but is coming.

Faith is less certitude, than persistence. And it may be filled with doubt. Maybe a little doubt is good. It is not in seeking God that religions go wrong, but when they're sure they have every answer. No one blows themselves up for Allah if they are in doubt. Empty tombs generate faith, not certitude. The measure of our faith is not so much in our certainty as in our seeking.

Charles Handy, who taught at the London Business School, wrote about lessons he learned in the worldwide economic crash on Black Monday, nearly 20 years ago. "*Certainty has its seductions,*" he said, right before getting stuck with an Italian Villa he could no longer afford, "*Thus the illusion of certainty made a monkey out of me.*" But he found some freedom in the world that opened up after that, a world that contained now doubt, even skepticism. "*When I was in school I did not learn anything much that I now remember, except for this hidden message, that every major problem in life had already been solved...those answers were in the teacher's head or in her textbook, but not mine...For years afterward, when confronted with a problem that was new to me, I ran for an expert. It never occurred to me, in that world of certainty, that some problems were new, or that I might come up with my own answers... The hidden message from my school...was not only crippling; it was wrong. The world is not an unsolved puzzle waiting for the occasional genius to unlock its secrets. The world, or most of it, is an empty space waiting to be filled.... I could jump into the space myself.*"ⁱⁱⁱ

I think it is difficult to be a thinking, seeking Christian, when so many other religious people out there – from all kinds of faiths – are so filled with certainty. But what faith is it when that certain faith only assures us that – funny thing – God thinks exactly like we do! What faith is it that is not satisfied that the cross and resurrection is enough, as a revelation from God? So they have to invent violent apocalypses (like the *Left Behind* series) that wipe out everyone that is deemed to be “bad”.

Faith and certitude are not the same thing. And it is difficult to be a thinking, seeking Christian when God seems absent from so much of life, so much of the world. Maybe we just can't see the holy, always. And Jesus said, "*Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*" Jean-Luc Marion writes that none of our boundaries can contain God, who so saturates or permeates existence itself, that the enormous love of God is sometimes mistaken for absence.^{iv}

Faith is surely not “believing what ain't so,” but is trusting in the deepest hope of our hearts that God's promise is so. The measure of faith is not in our certitude, but more in our persistence. In the absence of certitude, we have the promise (as Peter's epistle says) that even though we have not seen the physical Christ, we are kept safe by God's gift of faith. We are kept safe for glory. The 19th century Scottish pastor, George Matheson, is remembered for writing the hymn “O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go.” Less known is that early in his ministry Matheson's doubts were so severe that he decided he no longer believed, and tried to resign his call as pastor. The

Session wouldn't let him. They told him to stay, and preach as much of the Gospel as he could believe in. So he did. In serving that church, those people, *in serving that church, serving those people*, his faith returned. Stronger than ever. And wrote, as we'll sing in a minute: "*O Joy that sleekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to Thee. I trace the rainbow through the rain, and feel the promise is not vain, that morn shall tearless be.*"

ⁱ Twain, *Following the Equator*, 1897

ⁱⁱ Stotts, Jack, lecture at Ghost Ranch, 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ Handy, Charles, *Beyond Certainty*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 1996, pp. 16,17

^{iv} Marion, Jean-Luc *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena*, Fordham University Press, 2002