

Kilpatrick Sermon
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For many, today's story of the interaction between Thomas & Jesus is evidence that doubt is not good. Two 20th century theologians can provide us with contrasting thoughts on this. Karl Barth is quoted as having stated, "No one should flirt with his unbelief or with his doubt. The theologian should only be ashamed of it."¹

On the other hand, Paul Tillich said, "Being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt."²

Also consider this, in 2014, the NYT ran an opinion piece written by Julia Baird entitled, "Doubt as a Sign of Faith."³ Perhaps you will recall it, as one of its subjects was the Most Rev. Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury. The Most Reverend was quoted as having admitted that he "sometimes questioned if God was really there." Predictably, this caused controversy with Christians who have no doubt that God *is* really there.

During Holy Week, we relived some of the traditions at the heart of Christianity. Perhaps you were here on Good Friday as we moved through the Stations of the Cross. During the Easter Vigil, we listened as the story of creation was retold. We were reminded of Noah, the Ark and the flood. We also heard the story of the deliverance of the Israelites and the parting of the Red Sea.

On Easter Sunday, we heard of how Mary Magdelene, distraught by the empty tomb, encountered 2 angels. Scripture presents her as carrying on a conversation with 2 angels, as if that were a normal thing. Can you imagine even one angel showing up here and any of us having a rational conversation with an angel!?!?

My older sister has been telling the story, for years, of having encountered an angel when she was young. She says she was headed upstairs in our home when she turned the corner and

encountered this magnificent angel. She describes the angel in detail, although I only recall huge and bright. Instead, her reaction to the angel has always been what's stood out for me.

Confronted by this angel, and although we really needed an angel at that time of our lives, without a moment's hesitation, she spun around and ran as quickly as possible...away from the angel. I get that reaction. Our parents did not believe her when she told them of this encounter. I don't think any of us did. Yet, to this day she insists that she did encounter an angel. Who am I to say that she didn't?

Yes, the beliefs of Christianity are bigger than life. How do we respond to this? I don't mind admitting that there have been times when I have had doubts. My most recent doubts have been about whether or not there is an end to the ordination process, but I have also wondered about whether some of the stories that are central to the Christian faith were meant to be understood literally, or whether, much like many of Jesus' parables, they were meant to point to larger issues.

However, let's forget, for a moment, struggling with how literal (or not) one should be in interpreting the bible. You see, we are embodied, earthbound beings who live in the midst of *this* world. As such, we are fully aware of the problems of *this* world. We see the hurt, the injustice, the rise of intolerance. We mourn the victims of violence, in mosques, synagogues, churches and everywhere. We hurt for people who have pitched tents near the freeway, we hurt for children who suffer neglect and abuse. And, maybe even sometimes *we* wonder, where is God? Where is God?

In today's gospel, our resurrected Lord and Savior enters a locked room and bids peace to his disciples. Further, he shows them his hands and side. Unfortunately, Thomas is not present during this joyous reunion. When told of what happened he declares, "*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.”– John 24-26.

I have always felt that Thomas gets a bad rap for this. For simply wanting to be sure that the person the disciples described to him really was Jesus, he becomes known as “doubting Thomas?” How is his need for evidence even the most important part of this story?

Despite continuing debates about the role of doubt, I would argue that *this is not a story about doubt*, but a story about love. Thomas is devoted to his teacher and has no plans for following someone pretending to be his Lord and Savior. Besides, if everyone else got to see, why shouldn't he? And so, he requires evidence.

Let's also take a look at Jesus. Those who would argue that Thomas was wrong in requiring proof, overlook the love shown to Thomas by our resurrected Lord and Savior. See how patient he was with Thomas. *“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”*– John 20:27. Jesus lovingly invites Thomas into belief.

There are those of us who did not get to see. We can hear Jesus' love for us too, *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”* – John 20:28. To him who loves us, freed us from our sins by his blood and sends us out to share God's love with the world, may we honor your love and sacrifice for us daily by being your presence in a hurting world.

1 Bartley III, W.W. (1971). *Morality and Religion*. New studies in the philosophy of religion. Pittsburgh: Palgrave MacMillian.

2 Tillich, P. (1957). *Dynamics of Faith*.

3 Baird, J. (9/25/2014). Doubts as a sign of faith. *New York Times*.