

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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In nomine...

I. The story of the Disciples & Thomas

The story of Thomas is pretty straightforward. Thomas was one of Jesus' disciples: one of the core group of 12 in whom Jesus invested especially. Jesus washed Thomas's feet. Then Thomas saw Jesus crucified the next day. Maybe Thomas even waited around and saw Jesus' body removed from the cross and buried.

Thomas had spent some time with Jesus. So Thomas was shocked and appalled to see the people of Jerusalem, the ones who had welcomed Jesus as a king earlier in the week, turn on Jesus and demand his crucifixion. Thomas was confused about why Jesus, who had demonstrated the power to perform all kinds of bona fide miracles, would allow himself to be crucified. Thomas had known Jesus to be a man on a mission: but what was the point of it all if Jesus was now dead?

Can you imagine the shock and surprise experienced by Mary and ten of the disciples when they encountered their friend Jesus alive once more? Whoever heard of such a thing? It's crazy-talk, delusional. Thomas has earned the epithet "Doubting Thomas" because he couldn't believe the insane things his friends were telling him, that they had seen Jesus alive again, but different. I'd be doubting, too, if I was him! Thomas's demand, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe" is often portrayed as proof that Thomas lacked faith. But Thomas was not asking for special treatment. His friends testified that Jesus was alive because they had seen those very wounds! They testified to Thomas on the basis of their personal encounters with the risen Jesus. Thomas merely asked for the same. **"Blind faith" is not a particular virtue.** You and I know this to be true in every other arena of our lives. So did Thomas. Why should he, or we, have to believe blindly in one special case? That sounds super-fishy.

II. Skeptics Welcome

Thomas is a patron Saint for the 21st century. We've all been taught to be skeptical. "Superstition" is a derogatory term. "Spin" and "fake news" are epithets and represent problems, not virtues. We don't take anything for granted until we have received the offer on paper and signed on the dotted line. We read the fine print. And we *always* read the entire software license, the EULA, before clicking "I agree," right? (Too geeky?) Or maybe I'm confusing skepticism with fatalism.

I like Thomas because I can identify with him. He didn't just blithely say, "OK" and believe ten impossible things before breakfast. Perhaps a more accurate, modern translation of the whole "Unless I see the mark of the nails" bit would be "You guys are crazy. Is this some kind of sick joke?"

For Thomas, beliefs weren't something you choose because you want x to be true or it would be really nice if y was the case. Wishful thinking wouldn't do anyone any good. Thomas wasn't interested in warm fuzzies: his aim was to encounter reality with integrity.

Thomas shows us that the Church is not a community that asks you to check your brain at the door. Jesus does not call us to intellectual laziness or sloppy thinking. **"Blind faith" is not a particular virtue.** On the contrary, respect for God's handiwork of creation and respect for our own integrity both demand honest, open inquiry and careful reasoning.

On the other hand, like the EULA that came with my software, God may be beyond my ability to completely comprehend on an intellectual level. It's a big reality out there. I don't entirely understand why these glowing orbs called light bulbs seem to be on fire but never burn up. I don't understand the intricacies of craftsmanship that constructed these pews, the systems which allowed the trees they were made from to grow and thrive and transform sunshine and Carbon Dioxide into a sittable surface in the first place. I can't even comprehend the sheer size or magnitude of the sun which powered that process. I can't think that big. It's recklessly burning up gas like there's no tomorrow and yet it will last for how many millions of years?

So a key to careful, critical thinking in the church, where we think about really big things, is epistemological humility: admissions of ignorance and openness to learning. Even the best thinkers always fall short of complete understanding. A life of *faith* is a life that remains open to

questions, to doubts. If there is no struggle, there is no faith: only dogmatism. We deal in shadows and metaphors and traditions. We reach after the truth but we never really own it.

III. Believing is a group effort

But this all leaves aside the issue that Thomas was addressing. Thomas initially rejected the report of the other disciples because it didn't make sense to him in solitude. Yet Thomas remained present with the disciples until he, too, had a personal encounter with Jesus.

It is in community that we encounter Jesus. It is in community that "blind faith" becomes illuminated and makes sense. I heard a story about this idea from a Lutheran pastor named Nadia Bolz-Weber. (Nadia and I grew up in the same fundamentalist church tradition, so she holds a special place in my heart.) Nadia tells a story about a parishioner who approached her one day, looking ashamed. He confessed to her, hesitatingly, "I can't say the Creed because I don't know if I believe every line in the Creed." Nadia immediately responded, "Oh, my God. Nobody believes every line of the Creed. But in a room of people for each line of the Creed, somebody believes it. So we're covered, right?" Nadia reminded her friend that it's not his Creed they were talking about. It's the Church's Creed.

If you can't hold the entire reality of the presence of Jesus, and I can't hold the entire reality of the presence of Jesus, then where do we discover the reality of the presence of Jesus? Where does the Holy Spirit do her work? It is in the space between us, when we gather as community. We each hold bits and pieces, like the different lines of the Creed. As we bring those bits and pieces together, what emerges is a clearer view of reality than any of us could ever achieve on our own. It is in the sharing of wisdom and experience that we find we have, after all, had a genuine encounter with Jesus – enough to help us believe for a minute or an hour or a week. And then next week we'll come back to do it again. As iron shapes iron, we are being shaped and molded by the presence of Jesus among us, in between us. We very literally *practice* faith.

It is in this way that "Blind faith" becomes illuminated and healthy skepticism is satisfied. Like blind men feeling the parts of an elephant, we hold one another up in our shared faith as God approaches each of us in a uniquely appropriate way. Our individual understandings are never complete, we can never achieve a complete grasp of the truth about God and the world (or our

pews). But as we grow into faith, we find that the truth grasps us; it owns us, interrogates us, and changes us.

If you have questions and doubts about the Christian faith, then you belong right here with us. I have questions and doubts, too. So together with Thomas, we seek a genuine encounter with the risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Because, as I look at those around me, and those who have gone before me, I get a pretty strong hunch that in that direction, the direction of an encounter with Jesus Christ, we will find life.

Questions:

1. What are some things you believe without ever seeing?
2. What does believing have to do with those relationships that are most important to you?
3. How does God speak to you? (Guesses are welcome: certainty is not required, and perhaps not advisable!)