



EASTER: SKEPTICISM TO ASSURANCE

John 20:24-29

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

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I sat in the hospital waiting room at the intensive care unit with a mother whose fourteen-year-old daughter had just died from a long struggle with bone cancer. “I don’t understand it. Why?” she sobbed. “I wish I could believe that God cared or there was even a God. But I am not sure at all.”

The scene changes. A seventy-five-year-old man spoke quietly to me. “Pastor, I have always believed. I have never had trouble before. But since my wife’s death everything seems to have slipped away. I don’t really seem to believe anymore. What is wrong? What has happened?”

The Scriptures are also filled with persons who cry out of their darkness for a sense of God’s presence. Elijah was so low and afraid at one point that he fled from Jezebel to the mountains at Ahab and prayed for death. Jeremiah, the great prophet, reached such a low point in his rejection by the people in Jerusalem that he cried: “I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” (Jeremiah 15:17-18). Out of his distress, Job exclaims: “For my sighing comes before my bread, and my groanings are poured out like water. Truly the thing that I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me.” (Job 3: 23-24). Many of the psalmists echo the refrain of the following psalm: “O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (Psalm 22:2). Even Jesus on the cross cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

Mother Teresa, the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, is remembered for her compassion to the outcast, sick, needy and dying persons in Calcutta. Her devoted service brought her world wide recognition and the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. After her death in 1997, the process for her sainthood was begun by the Catholic Church, and she was beatified in 2003. Father Brian Kolodiejchak, who knew Mother Teresa for twenty years, compiled the letters she had written to her spiritual advisors over the decades. Her moving chronicle, entitled *Come Be My Light*, reveals her moments of utter desolation during her own spiritual journey. Even the greatest of saints struggle with the deepest doubts. Listen to her agonizing cry.

The darkness is so dark—and I am alone,—Unwanted, forsaken.— The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable.—Where is my faith?—

even deep down, right in, there is nothing but emptiness & darkness.—My God—how painful is this unknown pain. It pains without ceasing.—I have no faith.—I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart--& make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me—I am afraid to uncover them—because of blasphemy—If there be God,— please forgive me.¹

These persons, including biblical figures and great saints, have expressed the feelings of many of us. Many persons often try to deny, disguise or hide their feelings, questions and doubts. Some will not express their doubts at all; others pretend they do not have them. Others are ashamed of these doubts or feel guilty for thinking such thoughts. When we are honest, though, every single one of us at some time or another has questions and doubts about God and the meaning of life.

A Patron Saint

Thomas is a patron saint for more of us than we really want to admit. Easter Sunday is a good time to look again at Thomas, the one who has often been called doubting Thomas, to see if he might have some message that we need to hear in our modern world.

Why Was Thomas Absent?

First, Thomas was not with the group of disciples when they met together in the upper room where they first experienced the risen presence of Jesus. Thomas was simply not there. Now we are not sure why Thomas was absent. It seems unlikely that he had gone back to his job at this time. The other disciples had not gone back to their jobs of fishing or other work they had done before they met Jesus. Thomas simply withdrew from his fellow disciples and their mutual support. Maybe Thomas was like others today when they experience a tough blow in life or encounter some tragedy, difficulty, or sorrow. Some church members withdraw from the fellowship and isolate themselves from their church community. Rather than coming to church and receiving the support of a caring community, they become a “lone ranger” Christians and retreat into isolation and solitude. Cut off from the fellowship, no one has an opportunity to help them.

I do not understand people who say, “I can no longer come to church any more,” after they have experienced a death in their family. They return to their home where the person has lived with them every day. But they say they can’t go back into church where that person was present for only a few hours. Unfortunately, they isolate themselves from the community that should be the one to sustain, comfort, nurture, and support them during this time.

When a log in a fire is pulled away from the rest of the other hot coals, it soon grows cold and dies from the lack of warmth and support from the other coals. A person who isolates himself or herself from the Christian community often finds that soon his or her faith wanes, and he or she becomes weak and spiritually cold.

Maybe Thomas was just a victim of his moods. He seemed to be a bit of a moody person. He was low and when the other disciples met, he simply didn't feel like going. So he didn't go. He was absent. He didn't realize that religion is not based on one's feelings. Everyone needs to expose himself or herself to God no matter what mood one is in. Whatever his reason was, Thomas was not present.

No Secondhand Faith

Secondly, our text reveals that Thomas would not accept a secondhand faith. Thomas said, "Unless I can see the prints of the nails in his hands and the place where his side was pierced, I will not believe." He would not accept the testimony of the others. Their words just seemed like "idle tales" to him. He wouldn't even accept the words of the other ten disciples who said they had seen Jesus. Their experience was not sufficient for him. His faith was not going to be based on the words of somebody else.

I don't think we should condemn Thomas so much for his stand. He was a man who always asked why and how. He wanted tangible evidence that Jesus had really been raised from the grave. He didn't want to take somebody else's word for it. He wanted to make absolutely certain that this Jesus who had been crucified was in fact the same Jesus who had been raised from the dead. "If he is not this same Jesus," Thomas said, "then I will not believe." He was a realist. He demanded proof.

A Greek poet named Eutycus wrote these lines describing Thomas:

Seeing is believing
Was his motto. Better,
Feeling is believing.
The scientific mind requires
Substantial evidence,
Controlled experiments,
With photographs and measurements.
And Thomas was no poet.
Nor would he credit women—
Or even ten apostles.
He required the touch
Of his ten fingers.

Thomas wanted certainty.

A four-year-old boy was listening intently to his Sunday School teacher as she showed them a cocoon. "Inside this cocoon," she said, "is a worm. After a short period of time, this worm will turn into a beautiful butterfly." The four-year-old boy looked hard at the cocoon and then asked: "Well, where is the butterfly now?" The teacher struggled to know how to respond to the small boy. "I am not sure," she said. "But if we wait long enough, you will see the butterfly." After the Sunday School class was dismissed, the teacher came back into her Sunday School room and discovered that the cocoon had been broken open and the worm was lying dead exposed to the light. This tiny boy could not wait. He wanted to know right now where the butterfly was.

It's Okay to Raise Questions

There are lots of folks like that in the world, aren't there? They raise their questions, and they want tangible evidence immediately. They want evidence which can be exposed to the senses. They want to see, hear, feel, and touch before they will accept. Thomas demanded sensuous knowledge before he would believe that Christ was really alive.

But Thomas was always like this. He was the disciple who always asked the questions. In the upper room Jesus told his disciples, "I am going to prepare a place for you, I shall come and receive you to myself, so that where I am you may be also; and my way is known to you" (John 14:3-5). Thomas said, "Wait a minute, Lord. We really don't know. Tell us how we can know this?" I don't believe that Thomas was the only disciple present who had that question.

But Thomas was the only one who would ask it. Thomas was always asking those kind of questions. "Why? How? Lord, I want to know. Give me an answer. Give me evidence."

In Copenhagen, Denmark, in the museum of Thorwaldsen, the great sculptor and artist, there is a stone statue of Thomas which the artist has created. Thomas is shown standing as though in deep thought with his finger up to his mouth. Underneath his arm is a carpenter's square. This was symbolic of Thomas who always wanted everything to "square up."

A Man of Courage

Thomas wanted to have answers to his questions. But that did not mean that he was a man without courage. Jesus had to flee from Jerusalem for his life. Later Jesus received word that Lazarus had died, and he was asked to come to Bethany which was only several miles away from Jerusalem. Jesus indicated that he was going to return to Bethany. All of the disciples knew of the danger. However, it was Thomas who said: "Well, let us go to Bethany with Jesus and die with him." He was

courageous. He was willing to stand with his Lord even to laying down his life.

Questions May Lead to Great Advances

I don't think that questions and doubts are wrong. It is a shame that we make people feel guilty because they have any kind of skepticism, questions, or doubts. All doubting is not wrong. Some of the greatest advances that have ever been made in the world have come about because people have been willing to raise questions and express their doubts about what somebody else has said or done. The world was thought to be flat at one time. But Columbus said, "I doubt that" and set sail. Alexander Graham Bell was told sound couldn't travel over a wire. But he exclaimed: "I doubt that!" Thomas Edison was told that light was limited to the glow of candles and gas lights. But he said: "I doubt that!" Ford had been told that horse-less carriages were impossible. But he said, "I doubt that." The Wright Brothers were told that human beings could not fly. They said, "We doubt that." Von Braun was told that man could not fly to outer space. And he said, "I doubt that." And soon man set foot on the moon and began to reach for the stars.

Some of the greatest advances in human knowledge inventions, and scientific experiments have come about through persons who were willing to question and doubt what others said. I think there is a place for healthy doubting in the arena of Christian faith. One of the great church fathers, Chrysostom, said that Thomas doubted that we might have faith.

Faith May Arise Through Doubts

Some of the deepest faith has come about through the struggles persons have had with questions and doubts. Many persons have not always had absolute assurance at every moment in their pilgrimage. Look at the questions and doubts that Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Job and many of the psalmists raised to God. I am convinced that most of the great theologians were like Thomas by their nature. They have continued to ask questions about why and how of life and God. Look at the Apostle Paul. He was one who wrestled with the angels of the spirit and thought through the faith. Paul would not accept any easy answers.

I like Thomas. I have continually struggled with the "whys" of life. I have always been one who wanted to know how and why. I have not been willing to settle for simple answers. Oh, I know there are always those folks who have what Martin Marty calls the "country and western style" of Christianity. They can move easily into its rhythm of "foot-stomping, exuberant styles."ⁱⁱ But for some of the rest of us, the Pollyanna approach to religion is never enough for the tough, rigid questions of life. We want to know why. I like Thomas. He helps me in my struggle to believe. Tennyson has reminded us: "There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in

half the creeds.”

When I first began my pastorate in Bristol Virginia, a young teenager named Steve Boyd came to see me one day. He came because his mother had made the appointment. Steve didn't like that very much. In fact, he told me later that it had made him mad. Steve's mother was upset with some of the religious and philosophical books that he was reading. She thought they might destroy his faith. He sat in my study, and we talked about his reading. I encouraged him to read and explore the faith. I assured him that our faith could withstand any kind of questions. And if it couldn't, it wouldn't be worth having.

Steve graduated at the head of his class at the University of Tennessee, went to Harvard Divinity School, and later received his doctor's degree from Harvard. Today he is teaching church history at Wake Forest University. When I was at Wake Forest University recently, Steve and I talked about the conversation we had had years ago in my study. He expressed appreciation to me for treating him as a person and giving him the freedom to think and raise questions.

I told him a story from my teenage years. When I was about the same age that Steve had been when he talked with me, and had been a Christian only about a year, I went to my pastor with some questions I had about the scriptures. I didn't understand several texts. They seemed contradictory to me. His response was, "You are too young to be thinking about those things. You are just supposed to accept it." I never asked him another question! Because that was not my nature. I was a person who wanted to know why. "Explain it to me. I want to understand what it means," I asked. I know Thomas, because there is much of Thomas' nature within me.

Skepticism To Adoration

Thirdly, the text reveals that Thomas' skepticism changed to adoration. Jesus did not condemn Thomas because he had doubts. We do not read anyplace or anytime where Jesus said: "Now, Tom, you stop asking these foolish questions. I am your Lord and you are not supposed to raise questions like this. You are just supposed to believe." Nowhere do we hear that. We don't hear the other disciples saying to Thomas either: "Stop that! Just listen to Jesus. Quit asking questions." Jesus doesn't condemn us for asking questions. Our Christian growth often develops out of the pilgrimage of the questions we ask about the faith. Thomas was with the disciples in the upper room the second time they met together. It was probably a week later that the disciples gathered together on the Lord's Day. This time Thomas was present. Thomas set up high expectations about what he wanted to see before he would believe the resurrection. He said: "Unless I touch and see the nail-prints, I won't believe."

When Jesus stood in their midst, he repeated to Thomas almost the very

words that Thomas had asked for proof. “Touch and see these nail-prints,” Jesus said to Thomas. There is no evidence that Thomas actually touched Jesus. He stopped short of what he had said he would require. He fell down at Jesus’ feet and cried, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus’ appearance in the upper room took place to satisfy the questioning spirit of Thomas. There is no evidence that Jesus appeared this time for anybody else other than Thomas. I think Jesus’ appearance to Thomas demonstrates that it is okay to raise questions and have doubts.

A Remarkable Confession

We will all have doubts at one time or another. But the one who had been the worst skeptic makes the most profound confession of faith recorded in the Gospels. At Caesarea Philippi, Simon Peter responded to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say I am?” with the confession: “You are the Christ.” But in the upper room Thomas makes a bolder confession: “My Lord and my God.” That was a remarkable confession for a Jewish man. But this confession is what the whole Gospel of John was moving toward. In the prologue to the Gospel, John had written earlier: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The resurrection appearance of Jesus produced in Thomas, the man with all the doubts, fears, and questions, the extraordinary exclamation: “My Lord and my God.”

Thomas confesses that Jesus Christ has revealed the very nature of God. He acknowledged that Christ was both Lord and God. The Word about which John had been writing was identified with Jesus of Nazareth. The Word became flesh in him. His Gospel “had been written,” John wrote, “that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). As Lord, Jesus has dominion completely over all persons.

We are his subjects. The suffering love of Jesus revealed his divine nature. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” We can crown Christ “King of kings and Lord of lords,” because his life, teachings, death and resurrection have revealed to humanity the nature of God’s suffering, redeeming love. What a marvelous confession by one who had had such questions and doubts.

A New Beatitude

Look finally at the text and examine the beatitude which Jesus pronounces for future generations. When Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ, Jesus said: “Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah” (Matt. 16:17). When Thomas makes this confession of faith, Jesus did not say, “Blessed are you Thomas for such faith.” Instead Jesus declares: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Why? Jesus wanted you and me and other future generations to know that even without physical sight or physical touching, you and I could also experience the reality of his

presence. We might not know Jesus in a physical sense as Thomas and the other disciples did, but deep within our spiritual being the presence of Christ can still be a reality to us.

Jesus' tangible sign to the early disciples was also a sign to us. We draw on their testimony, but the continuing presence of Jesus is not limited by our physical senses. Through the generations, individuals have sensed "intuitively" the power and presence of the living Christ. We have "known" him, and experienced him without tangible signs today. Nevertheless, he is still real to us. Our faith rests on the inward eye, a perception within, a sense of the presence of Christ in our hearts, an insight of the unseen, yet ever present reality deep within our conscious and subconscious mind. This vision is based not on our senses but rests on a direct inward perception of the unseen reality of a living Lord.

A Living Lord

On Easter Sunday we celebrate the reality of a living Lord—not a dead Christ—we do not have just a memory of Jesus. The death and resurrection, of Jesus are, according to John, the ultimate and final sign. The resurrection is the last word, because it is the word of victory, the word of hope, the word of assurance that Jesus Christ is alive. Easter is God's word of hope and encouragement to you and me, and to all persons. You and I can experience this same Christ, who is the living Lord today, tomorrow, and forever.

A little boy sat in church already too full of Easter eggs and other chocolate candies and was wired tightly. When the minister proclaimed in his sermon that it was Easter, the little boy loudly exclaimed, "Yes, it is!" The people laughed—but "Yes, it is Easter!" Shout it! Feel it! Believe it!

Philip was an eight-year-old boy who was a down's syndrome child. He was a delightful young lad, but he had not fit in too well in his Sunday School class. The Sunday School teacher decided that he wanted to do something different to celebrate Easter Sunday. He collected some of the plastic eggshell containers that some pantyhose came in. He brought enough of these plastic eggs for his ten students to use on a little field trip to the churchyard during Sunday School. He asked them to find something that symbolized Easter to them and put it into the eggshell and explain to the others what it meant.

They all seemed to enjoy the trip and came back with happy faces. As they opened up their plastic eggshells, each revealed his find. One contained a flower; a butterfly was in another. They opened up one and there was a rock inside. "That's crazy! What does a rock have to do with Easter?" a child asked. "Yes," a little boy answered. "I knew you would be getting flowers and butterflies and stuff like that. So

I got a rock because I wanted to be different. And for me that's new life." They all laughed.

Then they opened up another eggshell and it had nothing in it. A child said: "That's stupid. Somebody hasn't done it right." There was a tugging on the teacher's coat tail; it was Philip. "It's mine," Philip said. "It's mine." "You never do anything right, Philip. There's nothing there," the children said. "I did so," Philip said. "I did do it right. Because the tomb was empty. The tomb was empty." There was silence in the class as all of the boys and girls looked at each other. That day they all felt a bit closer to Philip.

When summertime came, Philip died. At the funeral service which was held in the church, nine boys and girls from Philip's Sunday School class walked up to the front of the church to the small casket. Instead of putting flowers on it, they put a plastic eggshell on the casket. Each eggshell was empty.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! ■

ⁱ Brian Kolodiejchuk, editor. *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 187.

ⁱⁱ Martin Marty, *A Cry of Absence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 5.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, as we come to worship you on this Easter Sunday, many of us confess that deep down within our hearts we are not so sure about this question about life after death. We come confessing our fear of death, our unwillingness even to discuss death sometimes, our attempts to disguise it and flee from its presence. On Easter Sunday, open our eyes, ears, and hearts to the reality of the words, "Christ Is Risen!" Help us to know that because he lives we too shall live now and eternally.

May Easter resound within our being. May Christ's resurrection come alive within our seeing as we look out on the world. May we see life with all of its opportunities to serve you and help lift the burdens of those around us.

May we hear Christ's presence around us in the voices of children, the songs of the birds, the laughter of flowing streams, brooks, rivers, seas and oceans. In the silence of the movement of the stars, the moon, and the sun, may we sense your

coming. May we hear your voice in the cries of hurting humanity all around us. O Father, may we sense the resurrection of Christ as we reach out and touch. May we reach out to those who have needs and touch them. Teach us how to minister as your hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouths. Teach us to hear you and sense you all around us and within us. Put Easter in our hearts, eyes, ears and mouths.

May our lives be so changed by the reality of your living presence that we will be forever different. May Easter give us a new hope, new courage, and a new sense of the mystery of your presence. In the name of Jesus Christ who lives among us and whose resurrection we celebrate this Easter Day, we pray. Amen.