

“The Patron Saint of Doubt”

John 20.19–31

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, April 18, 2004

I’d like to start this sermon by taking a simple poll by the show of hands. (Now, don’t get all self-conscious, just stick your hands right up in the air!) How many of you have ever had **doubts** about things like the bodily resurrection? How many of you think that **believing** is a really important part of being a Christian? And how many of you consider **faith** an integral part of being a Christian?

I’ve got to start by confessing that this is a huge issue for modern Christians, including me! I remember when I was a teenager, and I sensed a call to ordained ministry. But I started to think critically about the bodily resurrection and the virgin birth. And I decided at age 18 that I couldn’t pursue ordained ministry, because I had **doubts** (with a capital D), and in fact, I thought I couldn’t even remain a member of my UCC congregation in Greenwich, Connecticut. I wonder how many people in our society are scared to even enter a church, because they have some doubts about what seems unbelievable to them; those are the folks we need to invite to our church!

Well, I’m here to tell you that you and your doubts are welcome at Plymouth. God is big enough to handle your doubts and your questions. As William Sloane Coffin, one of the elder statesmen of the UCC (who has preached from this pulpit) once said, “Jesus came to take away your sins, not your brain.” So, this morning I’d invite you along as I wrestle with doubt, belief, and faith. And bring your mind along for the ride!

I want to start by rehabilitating dear, old Thomas. I think he got a bum rap from the writer of John’s gospel; he didn’t want to take someone else’s word for it when it came to the resurrection, and first-hand experiences are the stuff of deep faith. Interestingly, the followers of Thomas wrote a gospel, too, though it’s not in our New Testament canon. It was deemed heretical by the early church fathers. (Presumably some of the early church mothers would have liked it.) Because the early church fathers destroyed every copy they could get their hands on, we didn’t have a complete copy of the gospel of Thomas until the 1940s, when a copy of it was discovered by a shepherd named (of all things) Muhammed Ali near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. The copy survived in a sealed earthenware jar, hidden away presumably by Coptic Christian monks, when the gospel was declared unorthodox. The Thomas Gospel is a collection of sayings of Jesus, rather than a narrative, and there are lots of parallels to sayings in Matthew, Mark, and Luke...but not John.

In a recent book, called *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels who teaches at Princeton, claims that the Gospel of John is written intentionally to discredit the followers of Thomas. “The discovery of Thomas’s gospel,” she writes, “shows us that other early Christians held quite different understandings of ‘the gospel’ For what John rejects as religiously inadequate – the conviction that the divine dwells as ‘light’ within all beings – is much like the hidden ‘good news’ that Thomas’s gospel proclaims....What [some] Christians have disparagingly called Gnostic and heretical sometimes turn out to be forms of Christian teaching that are merely unfamiliar to us – unfamiliar precisely because of the active and successful opposition of Christians such as [the writer of] John.”¹

You’ll notice that this story of “doubting Thomas” occurs nowhere else in the New Testament: John’s gospel alone recounts the story. So, perhaps Thomas has been maligned. And perhaps Christianity’s fixation on what “right thinking” or orthodoxy has been overemphasized over the millennia.

¹ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*. (NY: Random House, 2003) p. 73.

So, I'd like to recanonize St. Thomas as the patron saint of doubt, and to put him into the Protestant catalog of saints, as one apostle who had a healthy sense of intellectual integrity and curiosity.



So, let's talk about **doubt**. I usually appreciate the New Revised Standard Version's translation of the Greek of the New Testament, but I take exception with a critical sentence you heard in this morning's reading: "Do not doubt, but believe." The Greek word translated as "doubt" is a *apistos*, which comes from the root *pistos* with "a" added at the beginning to negate it. *Pistos* means faithful. Both the King James Version and the Geneva Bible translate *apistos* as "faithless." So, the writer of John's gospel accuses Thomas of being "faithless," which is worse than doubting.

So, what does "doubt" mean? The Oxford English Dictionary lists as its first definition "to be undecided." Doubt is about thinking, about having some intellectual questions or concerns about something. I have doubts about aspects of Christianity, don't you?

You've heard me quote Paul Tillich a lot over the last month or two, so here's another pithy little saying from the great theologian: "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith."

So, the next time you have questions, concerns, or doubts about some aspect of the Christian tradition, a story in the Bible, or even something you hear from the pulpit, it's not likely that you're being faithless. Rather, you're really grappling with your faith, which is a sign of health.

Frederick Buechner, who always has something amusing to say in redefining theology, writes this about doubt: "If you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubt are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.... In my head there is almost nothing I can't doubt when the fit is upon me – the divinity of Christ, the efficacy of the sacraments, the significance of the church, the existence of God. But even when I am at my most skeptical, I go on with my life as though nothing untoward has happened."²

Doubt is a healthy part of faith: it shows that you're actively engaging your faith, not negating it. But, I'd also say that doubt, while a healthy stop along the journey, is not the final destination. If you spend all your time fixated on denying the virgin birth or the bodily, you won't be able to get beyond it to see the deeper truths they point to. Sometimes we view the unbelievable as hard, cold fact, and sometimes we need to see the unbelievable as a signpost, pointing us in the direction of ineffable truth and mystery. Just because we can't explain something doesn't mean it didn't happen. But, just because it's in the Bible doesn't mean that it did.



So, what about **faith**? It's really an amazing word. Awhile back, I didn't like that word so much, because I equated it with "belief." I heard people say crazy things: like "You just have to have faith" when something inexplicable happens, especially something bad. That just doesn't sit well for me.

Over the years, though, I've thought about faith *not* as turning off all my powers of critical thinking and resigning myself to whatever someone else says. Instead, I think of faith as **trust** in God, as a **relationship** with God. And like all relationships, faith

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1973 and 1993), p. 23.

requires attention and nurture. We need to spend time developing our relationship with God.

Faith is also dependent on its object. You can no more have faith without an object than you can have love without an object. When I say, “I have faith *in you*,” it means that I have a trusting relationship with you. Saying “I love you” means something. Saying “I have love” doesn’t.

It’s instructive to look at the Greek of the New Testament. The noun *pistis* (which means faith) occurs *nowhere* in John’s gospel, though it occurs in the other three gospels and in Paul’s letters. But its adjectival form, *pistos*, occurs in this morning’s text. In Greek, it says, “Ginou apistos alla pistos.” You can hear that the words “apistos” and “pistos” are closely related. So, why does the NRSV say “Do not doubt, but believe”? It’s taking two adjectives and creating verbs out of them: doubt and believe, and we do not have an English verb that means “faithing,” so like other translations, it defaults to “believing.” But, faithing and believing are quite different, the way we use them. In our modern context, faithing has to do with relationship; believing has to do with intellectual assent.

To my mind, the best translation is “Do not be faithless, but rather faithful.” That keeps the parallel construction of “*pistos*” and “*apistos*,” and it keeps them as adjectives.

I’ll bet your asking yourself why you should care about this. I’d say that you should care because the church over the millennia has used the model of “doubting Thomas” to keep the laity in submission and within the bounds of rigid orthodoxy; it’s kept us from asking the tough questions. Our Congregational tradition was born in the Age of Enlightenment, and our strong tradition of education for clergy and laity and our strong support of public education relies on the idea that God gave you a mind to use, not to ignore.

So, the next time you hear some well-meaning fundamentalist spouting off about creationism or men being the head of the household or the sinfulness of being gay, I’d ask you to pause and give thanks for *your* faith in God and also for a religious tradition that invites you to bring your brain to church on Sunday.



And finally, on to **believing**. The English verb “believe” comes from the Middle English word “beléfan,” which is related to “belove.” So, again, the root of this word (like faith) is about relationship – not about lock-step assent to a doctrine or dogma. Interestingly, the Oxford English Dictionary’s first definition of “believe” is to have confidence or faith in. And its third definition is to hold an opinion or to think.

But, if you’re like most of us, you believe that “believe” has the sense of holding an opinion, thinking, or intellectual assent. (As in “I believe that you’re telling the truth.”) But, the sad part is that “believe” also connotes a sense of not being quite sure. (“I believe the plane will leave DIA on time.”) And when that gets applied to faith, it makes it a bit wishy-washy, kind of like giving tacit approval to a half-baked claim.

Which sounds stronger to you, if you were on an sinking ship: “I have faith in God.” or “I believe in God.” Which connotes *relationship* to you? And it’s that sense of relationship that both the Greek *pistis* and the Old English *beléfan* convey. Trusting, loving, embracing: they’re all ways of describing *pistos*.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote a terrific book called, *Belief and History*, in which he examines the issues of faith. “Belief,” he asserts, “in the modern meaning of the word, has had no place in the history of Christian thought. *The concept is not in the Bible.*” He concludes that “It distorts St. John’s Gospel to hear him as presenting a Christ saying that

he hopes his followers will develop a certain opinion about himself...It is a mistranslation of John's Greek to read him" in this way.³



Does God care about relationship with you? Yes, I believe that is what God desires with each of us individually and with all of us collectively. *Does God care about your opinions?* I hope you won't be offended if I assert that God probably doesn't care much about what you or I think about the ineffable, unknowable aspects of God's true nature. So, go ahead with your queries and doubts, just don't get stuck there.

What we do know – what we can embrace – is that Jesus provides us with a model of God's intention for humankind, a model rooted in justice, compassion, and self-giving love.

May you develop a deep and trusting relationship with God. May you love God more than anything or anyone. And may you share that love with others. For this is the heart of faith.

Amen.

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith. *Belief and History*. (Charlottesville: UVA, 1997), pp. 77 and 83.