

Unless this is your first Sunday with us, none of you is surprised at my saying that I love the Bible, I treasure the Bible . . . but that I do not believe everything in the Bible is necessarily — and please listen carefully to my words — I do not believe everything in the Bible is necessarily *factually* true. I hope that does not shock you, because anyone who has read both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 of Genesis knows there are two different stories of creation and they have differences in the order of creation, so even if someone believes one of these to be factually accurate, the other cannot be because of these differences.

But both are “true,” by which I mean, they have *truth* to tell; any *factual* shortcomings do not hide those truths, different truths, which are reasons for each story. In the Genesis 1 story, the seven day story, the male and female humans — who are not named — are created simultaneously and last of all created things. In the second story, beginning in Genesis 2:4b, God creates a male, Adam, from dust (the name, “Adam,” refers to the word for “earth” or “soil”) — rain has not yet fallen, — then creates the animals in an effort to find a workmate for Adam, and none of the animals being adequate, creates woman. Clearly, the facts presented cannot both be true, yet the messages of both stories are true! Genesis 1 is stating not *how*, but *that* the God of Israel created all that is and did a perfect job of it. That second story, to me, is about how the God who created us wants humans to be happy and not alone.

Two truths about God within stories that may be complete factual — well, I do not want to say, *nonsense*, because if we say that something is *nonsense*, we are in danger of *cynicism* and not likely to probe further and learn; — so, two truths about God within stories that are factually *doubtful* and may be complete factual fabrication . . . though factual fabrication such as are the parables of Jesus.

Cynicism is different from *doubt*, which brings me to our friend, Thomas the Doubter. The Gospel according to John is the last written of the four *canonical* versions of the Gospel of Jesus; John alone contains this story of Thomas.

Let’s review the story in which we today encountered him — though not for the first time; I’ll return to that later. Thomas was not in the house with the disciples at the outset of the story, but they told him of their seeing the risen Jesus, to which he replied:

“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.”

And the story — and the entire *original* book of John, ends a few verses later, beginning with Jesus’ saying to Thomas,

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” ³⁰ *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.* ³¹ *But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

And I believe it is safe to say that we join legions of Christians over the centuries who take this passage as being a chastisement of our own doubts. But I think that may be an incorrect conclusion — Thomas, after all, is not rejected, since he has not actually proceeded to touch, so believing upon seeing the risen Jesus, he is no different from the ten other disciples; instead, he is sort of a proxy for you and me — and the teller of this story gives us a basis for Thomas's — and our own — doubt

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

and repeats it!

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

The purpose of telling us — twice! — that the doors were closed must be precisely to warn us that what we are about to hear is beyond human experience, that *doubt* is a natural reaction, but that we, *as did Thomas*, nonetheless *should choose to believe!* *Should choose to believe*, and I'll return to that in a moment, but note that the writer is not particularly concerned with the reasonableness of what he describes and possibly his description of a Jesus who could pass through walls is meant to raise listeners' doubts. On Easter we read in Mark not only that the tomb was empty, but that the rock was rolled away, presumably because Jesus had risen flesh and all and needed the rock removed. Flesh would bear the "mark of the nails" that Thomas wanted to see, but flesh would not pass through walls — or do we tend to miss this inherent tension and even contradiction in the story of Thomas?

I say it is indeed to provoke us to wonder, not just to accept without questioning, without doubt, but rather, *despite doubting the facts presented*, to *choose* to believe.

And that choosing, that choice, can take place when we doubt, when we are even *skeptical*, but it cannot take place when we are *cynical*. The cynic starts with not merely skepticism, with often defensible and understandable doubt, but with a *bias against belief* that can keep him or her from being open to, well, being open to being wrong, to being wrong and to missing out on truths greater than the facts in a story.

The cynic believes he or she knows all the answers, and does not bother *asking* questions or *seeking* answers; his or her mind has been made up and locked closed. The doubter, on the other hand, may ask questions and grow. Doubt can be good; for instance, it is this same Thomas who, in John 14, asks Jesus,

"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

To which Jesus gives the answer *which the cynic would miss but that we all need to hear*, and might not have heard in the absence of the doubting, or at least uncertain, question by Thomas, the answer:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Glad you asked the question, Thomas; we all had wondered that.

When, almost forty-three years ago, I first travelled to India for the fertilizer project I have often discussed, it was interesting to me that while the vast majority of the personnel were Hindu from various places around the country, the Managing Director happened to come from the southern state of Kerala and was a Coptic Christian, or at least I think “Coptic” is the right term. By legend, that church in India was founded by Thomas the Doubter during his travels and evangelism, which travels and founding would have been coincident with and even predating Paul’s travels. In other words, well before the Gospel according to John had been written, Thomas had left a positive impact on the Christian Church.

What I am suggesting as a possibility is this, that the writer of John and his contemporaries and his audience knew (or could be taught) about what Thomas had done for Jesus Christ *despite* his having, no, maybe *because he had wrestled with, his doubts*. As I mentioned earlier, Thomas may be sort of a proxy, even role model, for you and for me!

And it is Thomas, this doubter, this questioner, who makes — and first makes — what is perhaps the summary of the entire Gospel as the writer intended to present it: *“My Lord and my God!”*

Do not be a cynic; as I mentioned last week and do not tire of mentioning again so long as you do not get bored, *cynics* are a particular target of mine, and I feel a calling to try to get them to open their closed minds just a little bit, to be *doubters*, instead of *cynics*.

For although we may doubt, if our hearts and minds are open, if we read the stories we encounter, including the stories of Jesus, not for the purpose of learning *facts* but of learning *truths*, a wonderful change in our lives and in the world can result.

Who knows? We, too, may go off to India — and if not, to Iowa or Montana or Wisconsin. Even here, in Arizona, but outside these walls, could be a good start in our being doubt-resolved Thomases.

May God both stimulate and resolve your doubts so that we may join together to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Amen.