

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas  
 Grace Church, Amherst, MA

March 30, 2008

## Coming to Believe

*“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 20:25)*

The story of the disciple Doubting Thomas invites us to reflect on the meaning of faith, on what it means to believe. We often think of belief as simply a matter of giving intellectual assent to a proposition. Ask the typical American: Do you believe in God? And the answer is likely to be yes – and that’s that. But is belief really no more than reciting formulas and creeds, no more than lining up the correct ideas and passing some litmus test of orthodoxy?

Billy Graham tells a wonderful story about belief. An acrobat begins to push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope suspended high above Niagara Falls. When he reaches the other side, he turns around and carefully pushes the wheelbarrow back along the wire, as a crowd gathers to watch in amazement. Then the acrobat takes a 200-pound sack of dirt, places it in the wheelbarrow, and pushes the heavy load along the wire, through the misty air. After reaching the far side he wheels the load back to where he started, while the crowd holds its breath. When the acrobat is back on solid ground, he points to a man in the crowd. “You,” he says. “Me?” the man says. “Yes, you,” says the acrobat. “Do you believe that I can push a man in a wheelbarrow across the falls?” “Oh yes,” says the fellow in the crowd, “I believe you can.” “All right then,” says the acrobat, pointing at him. “Get in.”<sup>1</sup>

Belief is obviously more than piously agreeing that a set of beliefs is true. The Gospel of John – the source of today’s story about Doubting Thomas – is a long meditation on the subject of belief. By my count, John uses the verb “believe” a full 96 times, almost four times more than the word is used in the other three gospels combined. In John’s Gospel the word “believe” repeats like a musical theme in a symphony, or like a shining thread that keeps showing up in a big tapestry.

Just listen to some familiar examples: If you *believe* in God’s Son, you will not perish but have eternal life [Jn 3:16]; if you *believe* in Jesus’ name, you will receive power to become children of God [Jn 1:12]; if you *believe* in Jesus you

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the paraphrase by Martin M. Davis, *The Gospel and the Twelve Steps*, quoted in *Spiritual Kindergarten: Christian Perspectives on the Twelve Steps*, by Dale and Juanita Ryan, Brea, CA: Christian Recovery International, 1999, 2005, p. 18.

*believe* not in him but in the one who sent him” [Jn 12:44]; if you *believe* in Jesus, even though you die, you will live [Jn 11:25b].

The end of today’s passage, which is arguably the climax of the Gospel of John, states very clearly why the Gospel was written in the first place: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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” [Jn 20:30-31].

But should we think of belief as the decision to accept something even if it flies in the face of the evidence? That’s the kind of belief that Lewis Carroll satirizes in a conversation between Alice and the Queen in *Through the Looking Glass*.<sup>2</sup>

“I can’t believe *that!*” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “One *can’t* believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen.

“When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day.

Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Thomas was not the type to believe in six impossible things before breakfast. Thomas wanted facts; he wanted evidence. He wasn’t there on the evening of the first Easter when the risen Jesus entered the locked room and stood among the disciples and said “Peace be with you” and breathed the Holy Spirit into them. Thomas missed all that, and so he refused to believe it. He had no use for second-hand testimony; he wanted to know things for himself, to find out for himself whether or not the Resurrection was true.

I like Thomas for refusing blind belief, for insisting on using his God-given mind and personal experience to help him discover what was true. That of course is part of the Anglican or Episcopal way: we explore the truth by consulting our direct experience and power of reason as well as by consulting Scripture and tradition. God wants us to use every resource at our disposal as we open ourselves to the truth and decide what we most deeply believe.

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, in *The Annotated Alice*, introduction and notes by Martin Gardner, Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, Forum Book, 1960, 1962 p. 251.

So it's good to notice that Jesus does not rebuke Thomas for his doubts when Jesus appears again a week later – he actually welcomes them. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says again to the gathered disciples, and then he turns to Thomas and, without saying another word, as if he already understands what Thomas needs so badly to know, he invites Thomas to touch his wounded hands and side. “Reach out your hand and put it in my side,” he tells Thomas. “Do not doubt, but believe.”

“Reach out,” Jesus says to Thomas – and to us. Move beyond whatever place you may be stuck in your perception of reality and explore what is most deeply true. We all have our usual patterns of thought, our typical preoccupations and obsessions and concerns. It is when we reach beyond them – when for instance, our mind grows quiet in contemplative prayer and we discover that we can watch our thoughts arise and pass away and that we are not our thoughts, that we belong to a much larger, living, shimmering, non-verbal reality – it is when we no longer identify with our conditioned thinking that we begin to be freed of our tight little grip on both our certainties and our doubts. That's when life really comes alive – when it begins to sparkle and to be full of surprise. That's when we touch our direct experience and discover the deepest belief of our heart, which is deeper than what we think.

When Thomas reaches out to Jesus, what does he touch? He touches Jesus' wounds. Jesus has risen from the dead, and his transfigured body can do things that no ordinary body can do, such as move through locked doors. You might think that the body of the resurrected Jesus would be entirely glorious, perfect, and intact, and yet his risen body still bears the wounds of the crucifixion. What does that mean? It means that the man who stands before the amazed disciples is in fact the same man who was crucified. The wounds in Jesus' hands and sides are marks that identify him, marks that establish the continuity between the flesh and blood Jesus whom the disciples knew and loved, and the risen Christ who now stands before them – a continuity across the divide of life and death. The wounded hands and side of the risen Christ show us that Christ will never stop sharing in human suffering. He may rise to the Father and take his seat at the right hand of God, but his body will never lose its connection with our wounded humanity. He will never transcend his deep sharing in and empathy for our human brokenness and pain.

Jesus invites Thomas to touch his side, where, John's Gospel tells us, a spear pierced Jesus during the crucifixion and “at once blood and water came out” [Jn 19:34]. That is an image of giving birth, for in the crucifixion the old humanity died and a new humanity was born. It's an image of baptism, too, the sacrament that Matthew Ryan Dineen will experience in a few moments, and through which we are re-born by being buried in Jesus' death and by rising to new life in him [Romans 6:3-11].

Something decisive certainly happened to Thomas when he reached out to Jesus – some kind of inner transformation. His doubts fell away, his fear turned into confidence, and his sorrow into joy. “My Lord and my God!” he exclaimed, in the Gospel’s climactic recognition scene. Yes, it *was* Jesus – and at last Thomas understood who Jesus really was and who he had been all along.

Every Sunday we’re invited to state what we believe. “We believe in one God,” we say in the Nicene Creed, or “I believe in God, the Father Almighty,” if we’re using the baptismal covenant. Usually we name our beliefs rather solemnly and with restraint – and that’s fine – but what an eye-opener it was last November at our “Creation Mass” – whose DVD, incidentally, we hope to release next week – when the choir launched into Horace Boyer’s Gospel setting of the Nicene Creed. Suddenly we were all rocking – do you remember that? We were all moving in our seats and feeling the beat and grinning from ear to ear. ‘Belief’ in God suddenly wasn’t a formal affair anymore, a tidy list of propositions to recite by rote and then tuck away in a drawer until next week. Suddenly we got it: ‘belief’ is alive. It is on the move. It can capture us – body and soul. It can make us want to climb out of the pew and into a wheelbarrow suspended high above Niagara Falls – to leap into life, to give ourselves fully to God, to trust with our whole heart and not to hold back.