

Standing With Thomas

Season of Easter

Second Sunday

John 20:19-31

Read the Bible passage: [John 20:19-31](#), The Message; or [John 20:19-31](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this post.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Thomas is a most modern man. He fits with zeitgeist, the sensibility of our time. If you read the articles by Robert Silbley in the Citizen over Easter weekend you would have caught the sensibility of what is called modernism - a sense of that what we know is determined only by the five senses. Then there was the front cover of Macleans - Is God Poison? - a study of the latest books by atheists, some of whose books have been on the best selling list.

Built into our modern consciousness is a skepticism about taking anything at face value. Before we commit ourselves to something, we want to know whether it will work thus worth the energy or commitment. So Thomas would not of been out of place in our time. For after all he is known as "doubting Thomas."

However, to read him and his question this way is to do a disservice to the him and the issues he represents. He is a child of our time. However, when we read more deeply we find he expands what is meant by experience. And as such he is a helpful illustration of a faith that affirms reason as part of a belief system.

To understand the narrative better we need to understand its context. The New Testament writings are from time that is far removed from the events of Jesus. The writings are the testimony of the early church's faith in Jesus as the Christ. They address the third generation of Christians who were psychologically and experientially just as distant and removed from the generative events as we are. So we stand in the same psychic space as those to whom the words were first addressed. We stand with Thomas.

We are the community of John's time, a minority in our hostile culture. We are the church that is reforming and struggling with how it will be the church, in our time. Just as the church in Acts we must change and adapt.

The gospels have different experiences of Jesus so we do not get stuck in literalistic ideas. First century people knew about resuscitated corpses - the dead surprisingly and miraculously coming back to life. It wasn't that uncommon in a world without scientific instruments and embalming practices. An illness could mimic death and a person could be buried by mistake. The storyteller tells us that Jesus is not a resuscitated corpse by saying he just appeared in the room even though the doors where locked.

But that explanation leads to the next question. Was he a ghost? First century people were familiar with ghosts and apparitions, so the story tells us that Jesus is not a ghost because when they touched him he had materiality - he had a body.

Resurrection is something absolutely new and different. Neither resuscitation nor ghost but with elements of both. Resurrection left the person changed - the disciples frequently did not recognize Jesus at first. He had to call them by name, or do something familiar before they knew who he was.

Marcus Borg gives us another clue to understanding Thomas. He divides religious experience, religious knowledge into three kinds. When we are children we come to faith in "first naiveté." That means we just believe the stories. But starting at about age nine we start to ask questions about them: Did that really happen? This stage he calls "critical realism." We have to go through this stage to have an adult faith. But we shouldn't get stuck there. The questions we ask as critical realists bring us to the truth within the story, the stage of mature and adult faith, what he calls the "second naiveté."

Thomas illustrates this process. He shows how important is that we encourage critical realism in our churches, especially in the young, so they can move to the post critical naiveté . Otherwise , as Chesterton said, "When men stop believing in God they don't believe in nothing they believe in anything." Thus we have a grab bag of irrational beliefs, like the Secret of other New Age spiritualism. Because it is better for the modern person to have something rather than nothing, even if it is irrational.

We share the same issues with Thomas. We don't want second hand faith.

It is not good enough to get on with the getting. Nor did he want blind faith, for that is too easily misused. Blind faith does not encourage us to probe the surface reality we experience. Blind faith allows us to cruise through life without really living its joy and danger. Blind faith appeals to our prejudices or ideology or the way things are without questioning.

Thomas wanted the experience of deeper vision or sight. He wanted to access the inner workings of reality. Like Thomas we, too, want a real experience of God. Like Thomas, we want to access that experience of God, the experience we need to change our perception about what is real.

Thomas' question does not come out of unbelief. When Thomas has his closed-door encounter with the raised Christ, unbelief isn't the issue. Perception is. Thomas is the empiricist. He is bent on historical concreteness. He applied critical faith, which then moves to post-critical naiveté.

Post Critical naiveté is based on trust in God. It is to have faith that God is working toward beauty and the good, and will not turn aside from this task. God is dependable. Such a faith knows we can deepen our faith by critical examination of our tradition and inherited belief statements.

This new naiveté knows that all life is lived in faith. All human activity is based on some faith statement. We know this by the language we use. We speak of optics or the lenses; templates; models; patterns; metaphors; and myths. Such images tell us we have a faith statement that guides us in our search for truth. For example, science tests its theories through trust in a community. Scientists believe that through testing and retesting we will get a glimpse of truth. Notice a glimpse for when one arrives at an answer one now searches for a better question by testing conclusions through retesting.

It is by living our faith that we deepen it. It is the willingness to actually make religious practices basic to our living that we can live in new ways, thinking new thoughts, imaging new reality.

It by applying our faith to all the issues of living and need that we deepen our faith. Faith issues in works and we when understand that the lure of God is towards a more human world and we work with this goal we show the the reality of God as the one who grounds all love. If we truly believe that Jesus preached an inclusive kingdom where God loved all of the creation then that will concretely change the way we live. The experience of Risen Lord brings a new, second creation to those whose animating spirit has been blocked, thwarted, or disillusioned.

Being open to a new sense of wonder, enchantment we live with wonder. This new life causes clarity of purpose in the new community. The early followers were empowered and emboldened to "obey God rather than any human authority." This was the experience of the church in the book of Acts and it can be the experience of this church. And it can be our experience.

The most profound answer we can give to cultural critics is by a our willingness to live our faith in practice and thought. It is to remain open to new insights, and changing understandings. It is to be a church that encourages the faith development beginning in pre critical naiveté, that honors critical realism, and ends in post critical naiveté.

All we need to do is to see this as the way of living fully. Seeing from the point of view of God is to have a resurrection perspective. To know we are acceptable. Within our daily life a new reality is emerging. In fact, truth be told, what is most true about life is revealed by this level of sight. Grace abounds. Each of us has this possibility yet while many are chosen few choose to let the resurrection carry them, move them, transform them. Yet when we do, it changes all of reality.

We are called to be witnesses to God's grace so that when others look at us they can take courage. We who gather show the world the truth of our faith. We have all that we need to be a great church. If we live that vision, which is true, then we become a beacon to others.

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