

## “The Leap”

Once upon a time, way back in the 1960’s, a thing called “sensitivity training” was very much in vogue. When I was a student advisor at Grinnell College they got all us advisory types together one day and had us play what they called “encounter games”—generally nonverbal exercises designed to heighten our awareness of I’m now not sure just what. We paired up with another person and tried to determine, nonverbally, the distance at which we felt most comfortable with one another. Then we took turns wearing a blindfold and allowing another to lead us around and help us discover our world. We experienced guided meditation, in which we lay quietly in a darkened room while somebody talked us through a virtual tour of some scene or situation. These things sound a bit silly as I struggle to describe them now; but the experiences were meaningful at the time, and we all certainly felt deeply that we were much more sensitive at the end than we’d been at the beginning.

Of all those games, the one I remember most vividly was the simplest—an exercise in falling. Surrounded by a group of eight or ten people each of us, in turn, would close our eyes, lean back and fall, trusting the group to catch us. It doesn’t sound like much to describe it; but the sensation of abandoning control, doing nothing to break your fall and expressing utter reliance on somebody else was a powerful experience, I have come to feel, of the meaning of faith.

The New Testament word for faith, *pistis*, is commonly translated “belief.” But “belief” is entirely too cognitive. Faith is trust, and the difference is crucial. It’s like the story about a high wire walker, standing above a raging waterfall and yelling to the crowd below, “Who thinks I can push this wheelbarrow across to the other side?” The crowd cheers. “All right, then: who wants to ride in it?” It’s one thing to give—or withhold—intellectual assent on some point of doctrine. It is another thing altogether to offer our lives, ourselves, to that in which we truly hold faith. We all do it. We all have faith in something: even if it’s faith in the idea that if I never lean back and let go I’ll be safe.

Maybe faith is not the conviction we hold onto so much as it is the capacity to give ourselves over in an act of trust. Not surprisingly, Jesus said it best: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 16:25)

Creeds, dogmas, theology, reasoning: these don’t really bring us to the point of faith. They are important in that, for many of us, faith needs to make sense. Theology can help clear the way, but it is not itself the way, let alone the truth and the life. Thinking takes us only so far, to the edge; once there we need to take the leap that is faith, trusting in our hearts beyond what we know with our heads.

The disciple Thomas has come to be the prototype of one who withholds faith. “Doubting Thomas,” we call him; and dramatizations of the Gospels paint him the

perennial skeptic, willing to accept in his heart only what can be demonstrated beyond the possibility of doubt. In a world dominated by reason and scientific method, Thomas appears to us the most modern of disciples. Skepticism seems a necessary defense against religious excess. It's one thing to claim that faith is like falling; but we don't want to fall for just anything.

The "Doubting Thomas" nametag, though, isn't being very fair to Thomas, who in fact is no different from the other disciples. Thomas's fifteen minutes of fame are spread between two Sunday afternoons. On the afternoon of Easter Sunday, the disciples are cowering in a room somewhere in Jerusalem. Peter and another disciple—usually taken to be John—have been to the empty tomb and returned. The text tells us that John believed (the word is *pistis*, trust) but it also says that they did not yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. So at best they trusted that this was a God thing, but without real understanding.

It is Mary Magdalene who encounters the risen Christ in the garden near the tomb—an encounter depicted in the much loved gospel song, *In the Garden*. She comes to full understanding before the others, and tries to tell them of her experience.

But there is no evidence that they are convinced by her testimony. If they believe her, their belief is not enough for them to take the locks off the doors. That same Easter afternoon the risen Christ visits ten of the eleven remaining disciples and shows them his hands and his side. Then he breathes on them, bestowing the Holy Spirit—there is no Pentecost story in John. Then he disappears.

But Thomas isn't there. Like the other disciples, before Jesus' visit all he has to go by is the testimony of somebody else. All he asks for is the same experience the others had, of seeing the risen Christ and his wounds. In this he is really no more skeptical than the rest. And his experience of the risen Christ comes a week later.

Thomas and the disciples thus become the first in a long line of would-be believers who are challenged to believe because of the testimony of another. They are in the same position we are in: having somebody tell us the good news of the resurrection. So it is that the risen Christ says to Thomas (and really to the others, as well), "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." That, of course, would be us; and every Christian since the time of Jesus.

John goes on to let the reader know that the entire purpose of his gospel was to inspire faith: "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." Again, the word translated, "believe" really means, "trust." John doesn't want us just to believe *that* Jesus did thus and so; he wants us to believe *in* Jesus, to trust him, and to live from that trust, that faith.

In one sense, that's a lot to ask. I, for one, have always had a soft spot for thoughtful skeptics—not the angry and iconoclastic folks who disparage all faith, but people who genuinely struggle with their convictions, and the relationship between those convictions and how we should live.

We have all been taught to question, to assess, to weigh the evidence, to read and think critically as a means to refining what we believe to be true. Particularly here at Plymouth Church we try not to be threatened by differences of conviction, but to embrace them as a means to deeper understanding. We talk about being a Pilgrim people, on a religious journey, and most of us really resonate with that language. We will readily confess that we are not in the same place now as we were ten years ago with respect to faith, and we count that a good thing. We expect to continue to grow and change. One of our saints, if we had any, would surely be John Robinson, pastor to the Pilgrims, who charged his flock to remember as they set out for the new world that, “The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from out His Holy word.” As theologians we are all works in progress; and out of respect for our sense of progress, we can’t help but feel that Thomas—whether he deserves to be called “Doubting” or not—would fit right in.

But in focusing on Thomas’s doubt, what we’re missing is surely the key element in the story. Thomas does not remain perched at the edge of the cliff. Thomas takes the leap. On seeing the risen Christ, and touching his wounds, Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” This is the most complete faith confession in the Gospel of John, and perhaps in all of scripture. “Lord” is essentially a political term, acknowledging sovereignty. *Kurios* is what Caesar wanted to be called, and what the Christians would refuse to call him, reserving the term “Lord” for Christ alone. And calling Jesus “my God” is the peculiarly Christian confession that in Jesus, we see God most clearly. Where there is a name for God, to Christians it is the name of Christ; where there is a face for God, to Christians it is the face of Christ. If God is a celestial and ineffable refrain of music, to us Jesus is the instrument that makes that music audible. Thomas has said a great deal here. He is no perpetual skeptic. He gives himself, without reservation, to the God revealed through Jesus Christ.

John asserts that through such an act of self-giving we may “have life in [Jesus’] name.” What is the nature of this life we find when we let go of the lives we have? Surely it means more than one traditional reading of this text, which says that those who don’t express faith in just this way will die because a vengeful God will unleash wrath on them, while those who emit the formula will gain the reward of life after death in heaven. I don’t think that’s what the text even means; and it comes nowhere close to describing the real meaning of the full, abundant, eternal life found by those who are “in Christ.”

Eternal life as John describes it is life that has about it a dimension of the eternal, life that is connected to God, life from which nothing in all creation can ever separate us. It begins in the here and now, through a dimension of trust that acknowledges that the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ can supply our every need. Christ is the bread of life, the living water, the way, the truth and the life, the Good Shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the true vine through whom we are connected to one another and to God. Christ is the one who lays down his life for his friends, in demonstration of the true meaning of love. He is the one who calls us to love one another as we have been loved. Through not just beliefs about this Christ, but through trust in him, we find a quality, a depth, a dimension of living that takes us beyond living to full and abundant life, life over which death has no power.

God calls us not only to trust in that sort of life for ourselves, but to become witnesses to life. The Gospel of John has a disarmingly unfinished quality to it. The very last verse of the Gospel reads, “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (John 21:25) And the truth of it is that the story isn’t finished yet; for the things that Christ keeps doing through those who trust in him, who find life in him, who dare to try to live as he taught, constitute a story without end.

To take the leap, to entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ, is to find life that is eternal. Nobody can compel us to do it. Nobody can make it convincing beyond dispute. Nobody can do it for us. We find our way to faith by many different paths. But the discovery, and the response to it, that Christ is both our Lord and our God, is a letting go that lets God become real to us and through us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

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