

**Sermon Preached April 27, 2014
Year A, Easter 2 – Doubting Thomas
St. John’s Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
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In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

There’s a story about “doubt” - a defendant was on trial for murder. There was very strong evidence indicating guilt, but no corpse had been found. In the defense's closing statement the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, decided to try a trick. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom!" He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked, eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally, the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty." With that, the jury retired to deliberate. But after only a few minutes, they came back and pronounced a verdict of guilty. “But how?” the lawyer asked. “You must have had some doubt. I saw all of you stare at the door.” “Oh, yes,” the jury foreman replied. “We all looked - but your client didn't!”

Each Sunday after Easter poor Doubting Thomas gets his 15 minutes of fame when he can’t believe that Jesus has risen from the dead. He only wants the same concrete evidence that the rest of the disciples get. Because who can imagine such a thing? Resurrection. And he’s not

alone. Lots of people today can't believe the Jesus story because it is too crazy. They want proof so they know it is factually true, to give it intellectual sanction, and believe.

In fact, the New Testament is filled with references to the importance of belief in Jesus, especially the gospel of John. Over and over again throughout the gospel the various levels of belief or unbelief that people have is highlighted. In many ways Doubting Thomas culminates this seeking of belief. Someone who doesn't believe, but comes around and finally does so. In fact, the end of our reading this morning says, "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." [John 20:31]. The author is stressing that the whole point of writing the gospel of John is so that we, the readers, will believe. We can't all be like Thomas, with Jesus appearing before us, so the author has written this gospel so that we too will have a moment where we exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" [Jn 20:28].

The word in the Bible that is translated into English as "belief" in Greek is "pisteuo." Interestingly, this word "pisteuo" is also sometimes translated into English as "faith." Same Greek word, two different English translations. In English, the words "belief" and "faith" are quite different in meaning. Since the verb form of pisteuo is used 98 times in the gospel of John alone, it might be helpful to have a clearer understanding of what exactly it means and how it is used.

Medieval English was related to German so the word "believe" at that time didn't mean what it does today. It meant the same thing as the German word "belieben," "to prize, treasure,

or hold dear,” coming from the same root word as “liebe,” “to love.” “Thus, in early English, to ‘believe’ was to ‘belove’ something or someone as an act of trust or loyalty. Belief was not an intellectual opinion.”¹ “Belief” did not mean intellectual assent to and choice in a proposition. “Belief” in medieval English was to “belove” something.

So when translators first began translating the Greek New testament into early English and they wondered how to translate the word “pisteuo.” When it was in its noun form, they used the word “faith.” But on those occasions which called for a translation into a verb form of the word, since there is no verb form of “to faith” something, they used the word, “believe” in its old English meaning, to belove something. But a funny thing happened over the centuries. The meaning of the word “believe” shifted from “give your heart to” or “trust in”, to meaning, “give intellectual assent to.” “Belief” shifted from being a function of the heart, to being a function of the brain.

Yet, 88% of the occurrences of the word “believe” in the Bible don’t mean a judgment of fact, but mean trust and loyalty of the heart towards something. In other words, it is more accurately translated as “faith” rather than “belief.” Think of the famous passage of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish, but will have eternal life.” “If we think that ‘believe’ means doctrinal truth, then the verse means ‘everyone who agrees that Jesus is the Son of God won’t perish’... [which what we usually interpret it to mean, but] According to its more ancient [and accurate] rendering,

¹ Bass, Diana Butler, Christianity After Religion, HarperOne, 2012, p. 117. Sharing the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith from his essay “Believing: An Historical Perspective,” 1977.

however, the verse would better read, ‘everyone who trusts in Jesus’ or ‘everyone who directs his or her heart towards Jesus’ will not perish.” That’s a huge difference in meaning!²

There’s a story of a priest “who starts each confirmation class with a jar full of beans. He asks his students to guess how many beans are in the jar, and on a big pad of paper writes down their estimates. Then, next to those estimates, he helps them make another list: Their favorite songs. When the lists are complete, he reveals the actual number of beans in the jar. The whole class looks over their guesses, to see which estimate was closest to being right. The priest then turns to the list of favorite songs. “And which one of these is closest to being right?” he asks. The students protest that there is no ‘right answer’; a person’s favorite song is purely a matter of taste.” The priest then asks, ‘When you decide what to [follow] in terms of your faith, is that more like guessing the number of beans, or more like choosing your favorite song?’ Always he gets the same answer: Choosing one’s faith is more like choosing a favorite song.” It’s a matter of the heart.³

In our post-modern, post-enlightenment era, we look for facts. Have we seen the Shroud of Turin? What does the carbon dating say? What about that new papyrus that seems to indicate Jesus had a wife? Is that legitimate? Is it scientifically possible to rise from the dead?

The point is, the miracle of the resurrection is beyond merely thought and words, activities of our brain, which are too limiting. The resurrection is a matter of the heart. It is a matter of trust in a God who proves Her reality as She unfolds in our lives daily.

² Ibid, p. 118.

³ Tim Stafford, Christianity Today, September 14, 1992, p. 36

Resurrection is not a decision of our mind, it is about an orientation of our lives towards Christ, faith in Jesus.

Thomas is asked to turn his heart to Jesus, trust in him, devote himself to him, and so too are we. If in the last sentence of our gospel passage wherever the word “pisteuo” is used we translate it with the words “faith” or “trust,” instead of “belief” then we get a new meaning. It can be retranslated to say “But these things are written so that you may come to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through turning your heart to him you may have life in his name.”

Amen.

Faith = pistis (noun)

Belief = Pisteuo (verb)