

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” That’s how the editors of this text have chosen to translate the Greek manuscript. Other translations render the passage similarly, supporting the conclusion that Jesus is saying that to believe without seeing is preferred over needing to see to believe. Consequently, St. Thomas the Twin is more widely known as Doubting Thomas. And doubt, for many Christians, is the opposite of faith. Not for me.

Let me tell you a story: In a 2005 PBS documentary called, “Crusade: The Life of Billy Graham,” Billy and his former colleague, Charles Templeton, talk about the issue that divided what had begun as a very close friendship. The two evangelists met in 1945 and began touring the revival circuit, filling stadiums with huge crowds. Billy had studied at Christian fundamentalist schools where he chose to accept the Bible as the infallible word of God. Charles, the more eloquent of the two, was expected to become history’s great evangelical preacher, but even before Charles started at Princeton Theological Seminary, he began questioning his faith.

The year he was to start seminary, Charles and Billy had a conversation in which Charles said he that he could no longer believe, among other things, the biblical account of creation. “The world,” he said, “was not created over a period of days a few thousand years ago; it has evolved over millions of years. It’s not a matter of speculation; it’s a demonstrable fact.”

But Billy could not accept that. “I’ve discovered something in my ministry,” Billy told Charles. “When I take the Bible literally, when I proclaim it as the word of God, my preaching has power.” He went on to say, “I don’t have the time or the intellect to examine all sides of the theological dispute, so I’ve decided once for all to stop questioning and accept the Bible as God’s word.”

Charles challenged Billy, “You don’t dare stop thinking about the most important question in life. Do it and you begin to die. It’s intellectual suicide.” Billy decided that very day that he would never again in his life allow himself to doubt. Some years later, Charles rejected his Christian faith but continued to explore the mystery. The two remained mutually respectful, but drifted apart.

Critics of the two have taken sides and some quite harshly. Some of the more moderate opponents of Charles Templeton claim that at some point, we, like Billy Graham, must stop the type of questioning that comes prior to faith, and make a decision to believe the Bible with invincible innocence. But the infallibility of the Bible is a 19th century American Protestant innovation, not part of our ancient tradition nor, for that matter, is it a part of Anglicanism or the Orthodox Church.

Some of the more moderate opponents of Billy Graham say that he preached unsupportable, immature superstition, using the same unchanging words and phrases for forty years and that we, like Charles Templeton, must never surrender human reason as an essential part of faith seeking understanding. But Billy Graham touched the lives and hearts of hundreds of thousands of people with a conviction that even Templeton admired.

Ironically, one of the most compelling resources that makes room for both of their perspectives and still other perspectives is John’s Gospel and the story of Thomas the Twin. In our reading from the New Revised Standard version of scripture, Jesus says to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” But more than a dozen well-respected English-language translations have chosen to translate this passage not as a question and a statement, but as two statements. The New Jerusalem Bible, for example, has Jesus saying this to Thomas: “You believe because you can see me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” There is no question mark in the Greek

manuscript, but somewhere along the line translator's theologies assumed that the question was intended.

And something intriguing happens when the question mark is removed. Without the question, it becomes possible to say that Thomas' path is just one way of embracing Jesus, not an inferior way. When two statements are side-by-side, it becomes possible that Jesus was simply acknowledging that there is more than one authentic way to embrace one's faith. That possibility opens still further when we look at the stories of people coming to faith that come just before our reading: the story of Mary Magdalene, and the story of the Beloved Disciple.

Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb in darkness and when she discovers that the stone has been moved, she runs to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Mary appears to be fixated on finding or learning the fate of the pre-resurrection body of Jesus, which is gone. When Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple reach the tomb, Peter goes in first and finds the face linen lying not with the grave clothes but carefully wrapped up and put aside. Having seen only the grave clothes from outside the tomb, the Beloved Disciple goes in after Peter and sees the face linen, at which point we are told that "he saw and he believed."

Now Mary Magdalen returns to the tomb, where she does not see either the face linen or the grave clothes, but two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had lain. She weeps at the absence of Jesus, whom she most likely equates with a corpse that has gone missing. She is still apparently oblivious to the resurrection. Only when Jesus calls her by name does she recognize the Risen Christ. She has been attached to a physical Jesus and only after obeying the Risen Christ to abandon that form of conditioned faith can she go and announce the completion of his hour to her brothers and sisters in Christ, saying, "I have seen the Lord."

The Beloved Disciple saw and believed through a sign that Jesus was glorified, alive with God. Mary Magdalene experienced him risen, returned to his own. Mary Magdalene came to love, life and faith because she saw Jesus, and the same must be said of Thomas. Thomas did not actually “doubt” so much as he simply refused to believe. In John’s Gospel, believing and refusing to believe are always a matter of free choice, not a response to evidence.

Notice that Jesus *did not* invite Thomas to do exactly what Thomas had demanded, which was to physically touch the wounds in his hands and side as if to verify a physical resuscitation. Instead, Jesus offers a different, perhaps *more real*, experience of his true identity. “Put your finger here and see my hands.” His invitation is not to touch or see *physically* but to grasp what can only be seen with the eyes of the spirit. Jesus’ command, which in our translation has been translated as “Do not doubt,” is more accurately rendered something more like “do not refuse to believe” or “do not be unfaithful.” Something more like, “Be not unbelieving, but believing.”

There is no indication that Thomas did actually physically touch the Risen Christ, but his acknowledgement of having grasped by faith the truth of the resurrection is clearly captured in his spoken response: “My Lord and my God.”

The Beloved Disciple came to faith by seeing not the Risen Christ, but a sign. Both Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin came to faith by seeing the Risen Christ, but only by turning away from a mode of experience that is no longer possible and toward a new and unfamiliar way of experiencing Jesus bodily. All of these are among the multitude of authentic ways to embrace faith; some through unquestioning trust, some through hearing the voice of the Beloved, some through seeing that which cannot be seen with the eye of flesh.

And so perhaps the most important words in this reading are at the very *beginning* of our reading—when Jesus came and stood among the disciples and said, “Peace be with you.” The peace of Christ given freely to all of them;

the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin, and all the rest. The peace of Christ given freely to Billy Graham, to Charles Templeton and to all their detractors and supporters. The peace of Christ given freely to you and I and everyone sitting in the pews next to us with all our differences and similarities. The peace that does not separate believers from non-believers; those who trust unquestioningly from those who question their way into trust. It is a peace that does not separate, but that joins people together across all perceived separations: political, economic, race, gender, orientation, even religion.

It is the peace of Jesus Christ himself who stands among us glorified inviting us to see and hear and touch in a new way of experiencing—to experience the Real Presence of the Word made Flesh in our lives and in our world. Challenging us to be, individually and communally, the body of the real presence in a fractured world.