

## **Feeling for Nails**

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Every book in the Bible has an agenda behind it. Here in the Gospel according to John, we find no exception. We see in this story of Thomas asking to feel the wounds of Jesus a particular commentary on the nature of faith and empirical evidence. And it is a partisan opinion at that. Faith, John tells us, is simply something to be accepted. If you have to look around for proof, then it isn't really faith. How much better the faith of those who do not require such tests of evidence as Thomas did.

First we need to set the context a bit. It is highly unlikely that Jesus' disciple named John actually wrote the book that bears his name. Much more likely, is that it was written by one of his followers. Indeed, the author of the Gospel of John is such a fan of John's that he is referred to as the "beloved disciple." We are also fairly certain that the book of John was written almost a hundred years after Jesus was born, making it by far the latest of the four gospels. So we can see how a group of Christians, probably all of them having converted to

Christianity well after Jesus' death, would find some reassurance in that line that "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

What is particularly interesting is that Thomas too had something of a following. Someone wrote a Gospel of Thomas that was not included in the Bible, but was written during the time of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Thomas' gospel was very different, however, in portraying Jesus' life and teachings. The followers of Thomas were Gnostic Christians, meaning that they believed that Jesus did not actually become human, taking on actual flesh. For a God to become flesh would be demeaning to God's infinite perfection, the Gnostics taught. So they believed that Jesus was only divine, not human.

So there they are; the followers of John and the followers of Thomas. Both groups have their own favorite disciple whose teaching they revere over the others. In the case of John's his followers are writing a gospel biography of Jesus, and in the meantime taking swipes at the followers of Thomas. It is a little like rivals meeting in the March Madness Tournament—each side not only routing for their team, but diminishing the other at the same time. John's gospel emphasizes Jesus' flesh. Hence this rather gruesome scene of Thomas, Thomas of all people, insisting on feeling around Jesus' body to make sure he could feel where the nails went in and where the centurion had cut into his

side. Thomas, and by implication his followers, may need such proofs, but the truly faithful followers of the beloved disciple John, do not.

Well, history is unkind to Thomas—he is dubbed “Doubting Thomas” for his insistence to feel Jesus’ wounds. Later, the Reformer Martin Luther exclaimed “What is more miserable than uncertainty!” Faith is what saves, faith that Jesus died and was resurrected on this Easter morning. Luther said that if you entertain doubt about that fact then you are courting damnation. Nothing less than complete and 100 percent faith will save you, Luther said. Faith and doubt are irreconcilable experiences. The death and resurrection of Christ are sufficient to take us into heaven. All one needs to do, says Luther, is to go along with what John saying in his gospel: have faith and don’t doubt.

Wow. That is a pretty tall order isn’t it? To believe fully and completely that a man who lived two thousand years ago, died, and came back to life; is a pretty tough pill to swallow. It sounds kind of silly when you put it that way. Protestant’s call this the “absurdity of the cross.” Rationally it makes no sense, yet there it is, and you have to take it on faith.

If we take a step back and look at this proposition, it seems well nigh impossible. The pragmatist in us yearns for some evidence, some tangible thing we can point to and say, “There it is! There is some little

piece of empirical evidence that reassures us that yes in fact the story is true.” Some of you, perhaps many of you here, have been scientists—people who rely on reason for information and base hypothesis off of that data, certainly all of us accept the validity of science. I cannot myself reproduce any scientific experiment, but I take it as fact the conclusions of science. That perspective seems to be far away from what John and Luther are proposing. Ever since Galileo we have had this duality: science and religion, reason versus faith.

And yet there have been those who have tried to bridge this gulf. Mother Theresa, who lived a life as close to a saint as there has ever been in our time, struggled with faith. Indeed, after her death her journals were found. In them she confesses to feeling the absence of God, the opposite of a mystical experience of faith that Luther might demand. So what does she do? She helps even more orphaned children in India. It is too bad that Mother Theresa didn't talk about this more when she was alive. It would have been fascinating to hear her reflect on this. But for her it wasn't about faith, it was about how you lived your life. She was action oriented. What you do matters even if what you believe is filled with doubt.

William Ellery Channing, the founder of Unitarianism in America, tells the story of his father's faith. Channing grew up in a strict Calvinist household in which his father ruled with an iron fist. His will was law and his word was a commandment. Once when Channing was a young

boy, but old enough to remember, his family went to hear the local preacher who was occupying the pulpit that Sunday. This was when all of New England, and all of the colonies, were being swept up in religious fervor and “excitement” as they called it back then. This preacher that the Channing family heard preached a strong gospel of faith or else. “Believe or go straight to hell, and let me spend the next half hour describing to you the torments of hell.” One of those sermons.

Being an impressionable child, Channing was scared out of his wits. He had nightmares. He was afraid that any little misstep on his part would be an indication that he was destined for hellfire for sure. For many days Channing could find no relief from his fear of this angry God, and spent a lot of his time thinking about what might happen to him or his family as a result.

One day Channing overheard a conversation that his father was having with one of the neighbors about the new preacher in town and the reaction he was getting. Channing’s father commented, “Sound doctrine that!” Channing was appalled when he heard his father give his assent and affirmation to such a terrifying doctrine. And why is it, Channing thought, that if my father so firmly agrees with this new minister who is preaching hellfire and brimstone, that he hasn’t really done anything about it. If you were truly convinced that hell was right around the corner, then wouldn’t you live more carefully? Wouldn’t you be paranoid? Wouldn’t your life change in SOME way as a result of that

belief? Young William noted that his father may have intellectually agreed with that preacher, but his life and his actions didn't seem to conform to it.

William Ellery Channing would grow up to become a minister and a well-respected preacher in his own right. He argued that faith and reason are not mutually exclusive, but rather enhance each other. Contrary to what the followers of John or Martin Luther may think, doubt has an important role to play.

Imagine you are Thomas in the story that John tells. All of your friends saw Jesus and you missed it! I think this is the best argument for coming to church on a regular basis. “Hey man you should have been here last Sunday—Jesus was here!” So to those of you who only come to church on Easter and Christmas: beware of what you are missing.

So let's pretend that you are Thomas. What do you think when you hear this story? Do you accept it as it is? Or do you have some questions for your friends? Maybe you want to feel around for those holes in his hands before you are able to proclaim, “My Lord and my God!” It seems to me that feeling those wounds would strengthen one's faith. A little doubt might push us to reach out beyond what is comfortable. For you see doubt has a positive side. As a matter of fact, Mr. Luther, uncertainty is at the heart of every explorer who ever dared cross the ocean in search of the new world. There would be no

adventure without uncertainty. If we didn't question the status quo, now and again, then we would never be open to new possibilities.

How many of you, when imagining you were Thomas hearing about Jesus' appearance would have dismissed it entirely? Occum's Razor would indicate that that would be the most logical conclusion. Your buddies are pulling your leg with a story about the teacher who came back to life. Seen from that perspective then, Thomas' request to feel for nails in Jesus' hands is a symbol of religious seeking. Without doubt there would be no seekers. There would be no one who questioned a belief while everyone else meekly went along with it. If you think about it, Thomas is quite a bold fellow. "Stand aside, let me put my hand in his side and see if it is really the resurrected Jesus." Not a whole lot of people who are brave enough, and bold enough to make that claim, much less actually do it.

The other thing I admire about Thomas in this story is how open he is to the possibility that this could actually be Jesus. If he were merely a doubter, then he would dismiss the possibility on the spot, and perhaps most of us would in that situation. But Thomas is like, "You know what—maybe it's true. Let's go find out." Thomas' faith is curious about the world. It is adventurous, and perhaps even humble. Maybe Thomas questions himself. Perhaps he is slow to assume that everything that he has ever heard about God or the Christian faith is all there is to

know. Maybe he questions his own assumptions. Maybe he leaves open the possibility that God is bigger than his assumptions.

The Unitarian Universalist theologian Forest Church wrote:

“Two keys to religious living are humility and openness. Some people will take a look at how little they can finally know and either give up or make a leap of faith that answers all those unanswerable questions so that they don’t have to think anymore. Other people will sense the dangers of openness and batten themselves down. But if you work the two principles together, remaining humble about how little we possibly can know, while remaining open to how the sky is the limit in terms of our growth, there is a dynamic to life that is wonderous.

I say to my congregants, ‘If you believe in God, the best thing you can do for yourself is to suspend your belief for a while, because undoubtedly your God is too small and you need to grow beyond that God. On the other hand, if you don’t believe in God, your very disbelief is a stumbling block. Kick it away and place your faith in something, in something more ennobling than disbelief. Take a flier. Expand your purview. Take a leap of faith.’”

Whether you are a theist or an atheist, Forest Church is an equal opportunity offender isn’t he? He doesn’t let you rest wherever you are. That is what faith and doubt, taken together instead of separately, can do for us.

Last week I went to a Chinese restaurant and got one of my favorite fortunes that I have ever had in a fortune cookie. It read, “It isn’t that life is filled with change. It’s that life is change.” Fortunes like that are nice reminders to wake up to life as it is rather than letting it pass me by. Life is change, and therefore it is precious because it goes by so fast never to be repeated. Every moment is a one of a kind event. Every day we are presented with miracles—that we can walk and breath and talk and listen and connect with each other. It is all a miracle. In a way, the only sin possible is taking all those every day moments for granted. Only when death stalks us, and we understand that our days are limited, not intellectually but at a gut level, then we can gather up those precious miracles of everyday living.

We could wait until then. We could wait to appreciate life when we are face to face with death and then wish we had more time to spend with those we love. Or we can embrace doubt. I mean of course this positive side of doubt that is that nudge, that little niggling that makes us uncomfortable enough to go do the things we always wanted to do. That reminds us to be intentional about making some room in our life to spend time with kids before they grow up, with parents before they pass on, with our friends while they are still with us. We have to have just a little bit of doubt—that is doubt in the notion that our life today will always be just as it is. It won’t.

Doubt helps us to not take things for granted. It pushes us to find a faith that is more authentic, just as it did for a young William Channing who could not abide his father's hypocrisy and so based his whole ministry on authenticity. Doubt spurred Mother Theresa to live out her faith through helping others, even though her soul found little peace. And doubt pushed Thomas, the Twin, to speak up, and be bold, and ask if he could feel for nails and put his hand in Jesus' side while the other disciples just went along with whatever story was going around at coffee hour that week. No Thomas tried something new, and so can we, if we have the courage to have a little doubt and a little faith. Amen and Happy Easter.