

“Believing Where We Cannot Prove”

Scripture: John 20:19-31

Text: John 20:29

We often hear someone say, “it’s too good to be true.” The implication of such a statement is that the truth is not good. It is as much to say that if something is good it cannot be true.

This is exactly what Thomas must have been thinking when the disciples surprised him with the good news that Jesus was alive. Thomas was what William James would describe as a “tough-minded” person. He was concerned for truth. He was concerned with hard facts. He was suspicious of emotional appeals or anything that smacked of superstition.

He did not distrust his friends. He just could not get rid of the suspicion that they had been deceived by an hallucination or some other psychological religious experience. Thomas thought the good news was “too good to be true.”

Now I share with Thomas a concern for truth and for hard empirical facts. I am suspicious of emotional appeals, altar calls, and drastic religious experiences. But in my thinking, nothing is “too good to be true.” In my thinking there are very few things that are good enough to be true. After all, if something is true, it is good. Even the most harsh truth is to be preferred to the most comfortable illusion. Nothing is “too good to be true.”

Whenever I finish reading a book such as “The Wind in the Willows” or “Winnie The Pooh”, I feel a little sad as I turn the last page and say good-bye to J. Thaddeus Toad, or Christopher Robin, or Winnie the Pooh Bear.

I feel a little sad despite the happy ending, because I know it isn’t really true. That there really isn’t any Christopher Robin; that I’ll never be able to sit across the table from J. Thaddeus Toad in his magnificent “Toad Hall; and converse with him about his adventures.

But what if you and I were to discover that the stories really were true? What if we were to discover that they were not only good stories, but true stories? In fact, what if we were walking

through the field one fine morning and were to fall into a rabbit-hole and find ourselves to be a part of that story?

I'm sure that we would say with Alice in Wonderland, "I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what can have happened to me! When I used to read fairy-tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now I am in the middle of one!"

This was the reaction of Thomas when he found that the good news his friends had told him was really true. "My lord, and my God," he cries out. He had heard the story from his friends, but like Alice, "fancied that kind of thing never happened."

This is the reaction that each one of us experiences when we realize that Christ indeed is risen, in time, in space, in history, and that he is alive in the world where you and I live.

In the Scripture read this morning John tells us that the disciples were "glad when they saw the Lord" and realized that the good news was true.

When they had first heard the story of the empty tomb and the Risen Christ from the women they thought it sounded like a fairy-tale. Luke candidly tells us that "these words seemed to them an idle tale" The story was too good to be true.

But when the Risen Christ mysteriously appeared in the midst of the disciples and they discovered that the good news was really true, Luke tells us that "they disbelieved for joy and wondered."

The resurrection was the best thing they could imagine and yet they were not imagining it. There he was before them "as big as life and twice as natural" There could be not no better news than this because not only was it good, it was true as well.

Now you don't get much joy or gladness out of a legend or a fairy-tale, or out of a rather wobbly belief in something that may have happened, but then again may not have happened, and which, in any case, does not make much difference.

You only get a deep joy and happiness out of something really good and really true. It is this same happiness that we feel whenever we find something too good to be true...and yet...and yet...mirabile dictu...we find it to be really true.

In down to earth terms it's the kind of feeling you girl have when the guy you like so much; the guy who you thought didn't even know you existed, asks you for a date. It's the kind of feeling that we had when we were children and the bicycle we wanted for Christmas, we were for sure, not getting, and yet on Christmas morning we blinked our eyes in surprise and wonder when we saw that we really got it. And on a more serious level it's the feeling that you have when your husband or wife or child is snatched from the jaws of imminent death and returned to you safely. It is this kind of feeling to which Jesus was referring when he said, "Blessed (happy) are those who have not seen and yet believe."

The word "blessed" is a word used at least one other time in the Gospels to describe the happiness of a person who discovers that the good news is true apart from demonstrable proof.

When Simon Peter confessed Christ to be the Son of God, Jesus says, "Blessed are thou...for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my father in heaven." He was saying, "This is not something that you have proved, Peter, because this is not something capable of being proved by you. Happy are you, Peter, because you believe this to be true when you are unable to prove it."

Faith in anything, whether it be Hinduism, Christianity, Humanism or Melanesian Frog worship, is not based primarily on evidences. Evidences only support a willingness or an openness to believe what is already there. It was to this attitude of openness that Jesus referred when he told Thomas to be not faithless, but believing. For if we have not willingness or openness to believe then the freest handling and the minutest inspection of the wounds in the side of the Risen Christ

will not avail to draw forth from us an expression of unwavering faith the reality of His resurrection.

True faith in the Resurrection is based not on the evidences of the senses or on miracles, but on an individual experience of the power of the risen life—an experience borne out by the living testimony of the church in every age.

John, the author of this Gospel, has in view those of his own generation and of all following generations to whom “no dream, no prophet ecstasies, no sudden rending of the veil of clay, no angel visitant, no opening skies’ has been given to convince us of the truth of the resurrection.

It is to men and women and young people in a secular and technological age that the words of our text are addressed. Let’s not, like Thomas, reject out of hand the testimony of those who have had an experience denied to ourselves, but relying on that testimony let us make the experiment of faith, which in turn will become an experience of happiness, gladness, and joy.

The experiment of faith, however, requires a world-view that is not narrow or closed. A narrow-minded person cannot make either a good scientist or a good Christian.” Thomas was not a narrow minded person. He would have made a good physicist because he was analytical and skeptical, yet, like the greatest scientists he kept his mind open for any new facts that might appear.

The person who is really narrow minded is the person who will not allow new truth, new facts, new experiences to reshape his old thoughts, theories, and experiences.

The narrow minded person is the one whose mind cannot be changed despite the evidence. He is the person afraid to examine anything that might refute his beliefs, his way of life, his securities, his gods. He is the person who called Copernicus and Galileo heretics. He is a person who is threatened by every new scientific discovery or theory.

But much of what we believe to be true today was at first rejected because of the narrow world view that prevented people from allowing new facts, theories, and experiences disturb their world. And probably much of what we believe today will one day be looked upon as narrow-minded.

This narrow minded attitude is held not only by many Christians, but I believe, most commonly is seen in the cultured despisers of religious orthodoxy, who believe that man has come of age; who no longer admit to a sense of dependence on God or a need of reverence or worship. He is the person who out of hand rejects any evidence whatsoever for the resurrection, or anything else he does not agree with, because his world view is so narrow and so closed that things like resurrections can't happen. For him, Man is the measure of all things; and if man cannot prove it, it must not be true. Man is in the final judge of all things.

But Thomas was not such a person. He allowed for at least the possibility of new truth. He allowed for the possibility of the unexpected and the impossible. He allowed for the possibility of the resurrection. One can believe only when he allows for that possibility.

But the experiment of faith consists not only of being open to what wild and unexpected possibility but in actively placing yourself within the fellowship of those who have experienced the new life of the resurrection.

No one ever comes to faith by himself. No matter what we have been told about rugged individualism nobody ever gets to where he is all by himself.

We are not autonomous no matter how much we like to think we are. No man is an island. We are not the masters of our fate. We are not the captains of our soul. So much of what we are and what we believe has been a result of our friendships and surroundings. So much of what we believe is based, not on actual first-hand evidence or eye witness experience, but on a trust in what we cannot see, in what somebody else has told us, a trust in someone we know and love.

The Christian faith is not for rugged individualists who think they can make it on their own. No one ever came to faith on their own. Thomas tried to go it alone after the crucifixion. He had not been with his friends the week before when the Risen Christ first appeared to them. Thomas came to faith only within the fellowship of believers.

But wasn't he prejudicing himself? Doesn't that lead to believing that something is true merely because you want it to be true. Yes, there is that possibility but there is no way to avoid it. We must realize that whatever we do or wherever we go, we are prejudiced in one way or another.

We have to understand that though it is always I who believe and I who decide, it is never I who believe or decide alone or in a vacuum. My choices are always limited and prejudiced by my friends and surroundings.

If I am raised as a Hindu, I have the data to decide whether or not I want to continue to be a Hindu, but I have no data to decide whether or not Christianity is true. Most people who are raised in the United States today are raised in an atmosphere of humanism with a Christian veneer. Such a person has the data to come to some decision with regard to humanism, but not with regard to Christianity.

So if you are not within the framework of an explicit Christian faith then you will be within the framework of some other faith or Philosophy, whether it be naturalism or humanism, which will prejudice your beliefs. Whatever you do, you are going to be prejudiced in one way or another.

But if you place yourself within the fellowship of believers as did Thomas, and study the Christian faith, with your whole mind and sincerely worship, with your whole heart you will have the only data available to decide whether or not it is true. It may be that you will eventually come to feel that it is wishful thinking and that it is too good to be true. It may be. But then, again, it maybe that that you will discover something that you thought couldn't happen. It may be that you, with Thomas and the church throughout all ages, will discover that the good news is not only good, but true as well

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove;

We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow. Amen.