

**Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 4:13-25; John 20:19-31**      **April 18, 2021**  
*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## BEYOND BELIEF

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

When I was writing my doctoral dissertation in the late 1980's and early 1990's, there were several nights when I either couldn't go to sleep or would wake up in a panic. Inevitably, my restlessness would wake Nancy up and she would ask, "What's the matter?" When I told her why I was so anxious, she would always talk me down: "Do you have to finish your whole dissertation tomorrow?" "No." "Do you know what you have to do tomorrow?" "Yes." "Do you have the material you need to write tomorrow?" "Yes." "Are you ready to write in the morning?" "Yes." "Well, then, go back to sleep and get up in the morning and write."

However, one time was completely different. We were in a hotel room in Little Rock, Arkansas where we had gone for our niece's high school graduation. I remember waking up in a panic and thinking, "What if it's all a metaphor?" This had nothing to do with finishing my dissertation. My anxiety came from being overwhelmed by the question, "Can I believe the gospel?" Thirty-one years later, I can say unequivocally, "Yes," but along the way there have been other dark nights of the soul. Perhaps you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Perhaps that's why I was so struck by the Preface to a book I have just begun to read with a group of pastor friends. The book is called *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God*. Here's how the author begins his book: "Imagine lying in bed one night and finding yourself flooded with warm feelings of faith. In that graced moment you truly feel the reality of God. There are no doubts in your mind this night; you know that God exists as surely as you know that you exist. Your faith feels sure.

"Now imagine a very different scenario. You wake up one night overwhelmed by feelings of chaos, emptiness, doubt. Try as you might, you can no longer envision the existence of God or convince yourself that you believe. You try to imagine God's existence, feel God's reality, but you draw a blank and your heart fills with the sense that all you've believed in is nothing but wishful thinking. Your heart tells you the heavens are empty. You stare holes into the darkness and all that stares back is darkness, nothingness, emptiness."

The author continues, "Does this mean that on the one night your faith is strong and on the other that it is weak? Is faith a matter of being able to imagine or feel that God exists? Not necessarily . . . Faith is not the same thing as being able to imagine God's existence or even of being able to feel God on an emotional level . . . nor is faith dead just because the imagination and the heart have run dry. God exists, independent of our perceptions. Faith is something deeper."<sup>1</sup>

In some ways, you have to feel sorry for Thomas the Twin. Despite making the deepest and most basic confession of faith in Jesus — “My Lord and my God!” — he will always be remembered as “Doubting Thomas.” Did you notice, though, that Thomas asked for nothing more than his fellow disciples had already received? “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) A week earlier, when Jesus appeared to the other ten disciples, Jesus “showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” (John 20:20) In Luke’s version of this story, Jesus tells his disciples, “Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And what was the disciples’ reaction? “In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering. . .” (Luke 24:39-41)

So, when we have those dark nights of the soul, we find ourselves in good company with Thomas and the other disciples and plenty of other folks in the Bible. At the end of Matthew’s gospel, when Jesus gives the Great Commission on the mountain in Galilee, “when [the disciples] saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.” (Matthew 28:17) When the desperate father begged Jesus to heal his son — “If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us,” Jesus said, “If you are able! — All things can be done for the one who believes.” The father cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:22-24)

Even though Abraham’s faith is held up as the model of trusting in the Lord, he and his wife had a hard time believing the word of the Lord that promised they would have a son in their old age. In a parallel story from the New Testament, old man Zechariah doubted the angel’s message that his elderly wife Elizabeth would have a son. And the disciples doubted the women when they excitedly said, “We have seen the Lord!” The list goes on and on . . .

Each week in worship we say in unison, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth . . . And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord . . . I believe in the Holy Ghost . . .” Sometimes we use a different Affirmation of Faith. When I lead worship at a funeral, I often say, “It’s always good to affirm our faith, but especially at times such as this.” And it is important to say “This is what we believe!” Throughout the centuries, the church has always said “This is what we believe!” That’s why we have different creeds and confessions. But, as the author of *The Shattered Lantern* says, “Faith is something deeper” than just accepting facts or indisputable evidence. As one writer has put it, “Belief itself comes from another source than evidence. It is a gift of God.”

Aren’t you glad that Bible characters aren’t perfect? It would have been easy for the writers to portray them as unblemished saints. Instead, we hear about Sarai laughing at God’s promise of a son; Job demanding a face-to-face meeting with God so God can explain himself; Jonah running the other way from God’s call in his life; Peter rebuking Jesus when Jesus talked about his upcoming suffering; and ole Thomas saying, “Unless I see, I won’t believe.” Because, let’s be honest, aren’t we all like those folks in the Bible from time to time?

As part of my commitment as a member of the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina, I serve on the Commission on Ministry. Thursday we examined a minister who is transferring into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) from another denomination. Here is the last paragraph of her well-written “Faith Statement” — “While there are many things we do not yet know, we celebrate the holy mysteries of our faith while also seeking understanding. We believe that in the end, all will be made well. Every tear will be wiped away, death and pain will pass away, and all things will be made new as we are united with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer and are made whole.”

We “celebrate the holy mysteries of our faith” — what a beautiful phrase! That affirmation of what we don’t know, even as we believe and trust, reminds me of what Job said after God granted him the face-to-face interview Job had demanded and overwhelmed Job with his mystery and knowledge and power and divine purpose. Job humbly said, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know. . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” (Job 42:2-5)

Dr. Laura Mendenhall, former president of Columbia (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia tells a story of the elderly Thomas talking with his grandson, also named Thomas and known as Trey, about meeting the risen Lord. Trey says, “That is all I want — to see and touch for myself so that I can know and understand.” Lovingly, his grandpa replies, “Yes, well, that is exactly what I was thinking at the time. But the truth is, I did not need to put my hands into his side. I did not need to touch the wounds in his hands. What I realized at that moment is that what is eternal is invisible. If I could touch it, it was only temporal anyway. If I could understand it, it may have been only my human thought, shaped by my own prior knowledge, hemmed in by my own perspective.”

Grandpa Thomas sees the confusion in Trey’s eyes, so he continues, “What you need to know, son, is that I never touched him. I know I said that was the only way I would believe. But when I got right down to it, that was not what I needed after all. What I needed was simply to recognize that I was in the presence of my Lord and my God and the recipient of grace that I could not have earned.”<sup>2</sup>

I reckon I have as many questions about God and Jesus and the faith as any of you. I hope that one day, as the apostle Paul writes, I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. In the meantime, when you get right down to it, isn’t what we really need is to know that we are in the presence of our Lord and our God, that we are the recipients of grace that we could not have earned?

When Jesus told Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” I don’t think he was rebuking Thomas. I think this was part of Jesus’ commissioning of his disciples to share the good news. After all, you and I are some of those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Thank God that even “Doubting Thomas” trusted the good news enough to share it with others.

John tells us that Thomas met the risen Jesus one week after Easter. Here we are, two weeks removed from our Easter celebration. What can “Doubting Thomas” teach

us about living faithfully in the light of Easter? In her sermon called “Believing Thomas,” Barbara Brown Taylor calls Thomas “the last of the disciples to believe.” And she writes, “But what did Thomas believe, exactly? I wish I knew. How could you be certain of anything after a week like that? What had been certain before was what anyone could see: dead men stayed dead, bodies stayed in tombs, Caesar was Lord of all the earth, and love was powerless before soldiers with hammers and huge nails. Then Sunday happened, and everything was up for grabs. What the disciples saw that week and the week after was beyond belief, so that’s where they went — beyond the safe certainty of belief into the sublime uncertainty of faith.”<sup>3</sup>

Hear our prayer, O Lord: We believe, help our unbelief.

***Let us pray: Lord Jesus, this Easter breathe on us again with your Spirit. Renew us in the power of your Spirit that we may open the doors and go out into the world to bring words of peace to the people we meet. Renew us in the power of your Spirit that we may have life in your name and go wherever you send us. In your holy name we pray. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God (Revised Edition)* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 9-10.

<sup>2</sup>Laura Mendenhall, “Dealing with Mystery,” April 19, 2009 at [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest: Speaking of Faith Far From Home* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), pp. 175-176.