

“Seeking Proof and Finding Experience”

John 20:19–31

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

April 11, 2021

There is a monastery twenty-five miles northeast of Mosul, Iraq, the Mar Mattai monastery, founded in the fourth century CE, that has a reliquary which contains what they claim is the index finger of Thomas, the disciple of Jesus. Never mind the fact that Thomas never places his finger in the resurrected Jesus’ wounds, even when he sees him, his finger has been viewed to have great significance, and thus, if any church or monastery has the remains of his finger, that would be a big deal, at least for those who value relics.

But how do we know that what this Iraqi monastery possesses is Thomas’ finger, especially when basilicas in Rome (Holy Cross in Jerusalem) and Ortona (St. Thomas the Apostle), Italy also claim to have Thomas’ index finger? We have no DNA evidence to compare. How do we prove that one claim or the other is genuine or not? There doesn’t seem to be a way, other than by faith (information from an article written by Peter W. Marty, *Christian Century*, March 24, 2021, p. 23).

And even if we found a way to prove the authenticity of any of these relics, what difference would it make? Do such relics have any power, other than in the minds of some believers?

I share all of this information here not to launch an inquiry into the authenticity of relics in general or to try to prove which finger relic might have belonged to Thomas, but to suggest that the questions involved in such matters are similar to the questions in today’s reading from John and the questions we ask. How do early believers know that Jesus is alive? How do we know anything that we know, much less prove that our faith is genuine? What gives us a basis for trusting that our belief in the resurrection is more than wishful thinking?

Perhaps there is no way to prove such a thing. Even science does not speak of proof. It speaks of theories and data that either confirms or rejects such theories, but there is always the possibility of new data that might

reframe our understanding. And the truth is very few things that really matter, like love, can be proven.

Faith is like this, but we long for some assurance, something on which to base our belief. While we may not stay awake at night wondering who might have Thomas' index finger, whether or not Jesus is raised — no matter how we understand this experience — does matter to us. Whether or not there is hope for more than this life matters. On what do we base our belief?

The people within the narrative of John 20 come to believe at different times and in what may seem to be different ways, but there is a common theme to their experience. In last week's reading, the text says that when the disciple with Simon Peter walks into the tomb, he believes, but it is not clear what he believes, perhaps only that the tomb is empty. The text says they do not yet understand that Jesus must be raised, and they go home and lock themselves inside. Only when Jesus appears in today's reading do they believe that he has been raised.

Mary Magdalene struggles to believe that Jesus is alive, even when he is standing right in front of her. As we noted last week, she is just too consumed by grief to make room for hope. And let's be fair — no matter how hopeful she is, dead people don't come back to life. Only when Jesus calls her by name does she believe. She tells the others what she has seen and whom she has seen, but as we know from Luke's account, they don't believe her or the other women. They view their testimony as an idle tale, until they see Jesus for themselves, and then they believe — all but Thomas, of course, because he is not there.

So, how does Thomas come to believe? We have vilified him, branding him as "Doubting Thomas," but wrongly so. He does doubt the word of others, even says he will not believe unless he is able to see for himself, see the mark of the nails in his hands and put his finger in the mark and his hand in Jesus' side. He is searching for proof, but so is everyone else. No one in the story believes until he/she sees Jesus. The only thing different about Thomas is that he isn't there when Jesus makes his first appearance. He has missed the big retreat everyone is talking about and is made to look like a slackard — doubting Thomas...

But Thomas is the one in John 11:16 who says, “Let us also go, that we may die with him,” when the others are balking at Jesus’ desire to go to Bethany which is near Jerusalem. He is the one who asks Jesus a question of clarification in John 14:5, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” And he is the one in John 20:28 who, when he sees the Risen Christ, exclaims, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus does say, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” But no one in the story fits this description.

Characters in the story come to believe that Jesus is alive and thus everything has changed for the better at different times and in slightly different ways, but the common denominator is that everyone’s belief is based on personal experience with the Risen Christ. There is no proof in the way of a rational argument or any other kind of evidence that convinces anyone. Only a personal encounter with the Risen Christ will do, but this has not stopped many well-meaning souls from trying to persuade others in various ways over the years, to little avail.

I have shared with some of you before an excerpt from Nikos Kazantzakis’ novel *St Francis* which illustrates the folly of trying to prove that the resurrection happened through rational arguments.

'Listen, my child' [St. Francis] said, 'each year at Easter I used to watch Christ’s Resurrection. All the faithful would gather around His tomb and weep, weep inconsolably, beating on the ground to make it open. And behold! In the midst of our lamentations the tombstone crumbled to pieces and Christ sprang from the earth and ascended to heaven, smiling at us and waving a white banner. There was only one year I did not see Him resurrected. That year a theologian of consequence, a graduate of the University of Bologna, came to us. He mounted the pulpit in church and began to elucidate the Resurrection for hours on end. He explained and explained until our heads began to swim; and that year the tombstone did not crumble, and I swear to you, no one saw the Resurrection.' (*Saint Francis*, p. 231)

I have nothing against theologians — in fact, I am one — and there is a place for rational argument in helping us to understand our belief, but reason alone does not make for belief. Only experience does that.

The question is — how do we come by such experience? The Risen Christ is not walking about in physical form in the twenty-first century. Perhaps this is what Jesus is getting at when he says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The answer, I think lies in our ability to meet the Risen Christ in our own way, in Spirit.

In his book *Jesus Was a Liberal* Scotty McLennan says that he will never forget how vividly his mother once described having encountered Jesus, first sensing his presence fill the room, and then feeling his hand on her shoulder, when she was praying intensely one evening at home. That experience provided sustenance for the rest of her life (p. 208).

Trappist monk Thomas Merton once described a similar experience. “Today, in a moment of trial,” he wrote, “I rediscovered Jesus, or perhaps discovered Him for the first time. I came closer than ever to fully realizing how true it is that our relations with Jesus are something utterly beyond the level of imagination and emotion. His eyes, which are the eyes of Truth, are fixed upon my heart. Where His glance falls, there is peace: for the light of His Face, which is the Truth, produces truth wherever it shines. There too is joy: And he says to those he loves, I will fix my eyes upon you... (*A Book of Hours*, p. 127).”

We are talking about something other than a routine encounter with a resuscitated corpse, something more than wishful thinking or imagination. We are talking about a mystical encounter with the Holy that is so real that it transforms all of life. Many of us have had such an experience, whether we have talked about it with anyone else or not.

It may have been in a time of crisis. I sensed the presence of the Risen Christ while praying with an elderly couple in a hospital room many years ago. I prayed for the man’s healing, for the wife’s ability to face her husband’s challenges, for their time together, no matter how long it was, but just as I started to close the prayer and say “Amen,” each of them prayed in turn, and the room was filled with a Holy Presence. We just knew that we were not alone. I have had similar experiences with people on the edge of this

life, just waiting on death, surrounded by loved ones, when we all realized we were not alone.

Or it may have been at a worship service. The founding pastor of the church I served in Winston-Salem, Jack Noffsinger, was a chaplain at the Battle of Iwo Jima. He nearly lost his faith with all the suffering and death he witnessed in a short time, all the young people being buried, but during the Easter Sunrise Service at Mount Suribachi, his faith was renewed as he sensed the presence of the Risen Christ in a palpable way.

Some of us had that kind of experience last week as we gathered in-person for the first time in over a year at Fletcher Park to celebrate the resurrection. We gathered to hear the familiar story and sing the great hymns but something more happened, perhaps because we were overjoyed to be together, perhaps because the day was glorious, who knows? It happened — resurrection felt like more than a nice idea to believe in, the Risen Christ was more than a concept. We could not prove it to anyone else, but we had something better than proof — our experience with the Risen Christ, a mystical encounter with the Holy.

Often we encounter the Risen Christ in the midst of service — Jesus did say that whenever we serve the least of these in need, we serve him — but however it happens, it is this kind of experience that leads to faith. Our trust is in a Living Being, not simply an idea that can be proven.

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg said this, “The core meaning of Easter is that Jesus continued to be experienced after his death, but in a radically new way: as a spiritual and divine reality (*The God We Never Knew*, p. 93)... it’s not just that his memory lived on or that his spirit lived on, as we sometimes speak of the spirit of Lincoln living on. Rather, he was and is experienced as a figure of the present. In short, Jesus lives (*The Heart of Christianity*, p. 54).”

Indeed, Jesus lives, therein lies the essence of our faith. He lives in our hearts and in the world around us, in acts of kindness and compassion and in every effort to make for a more just and peaceful world. He lives, and because he does, we have a basis for our belief, and we can live with hope.