

## Thomas – The Cautious Believer

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This morning we complete our series on characters in the New Testament. They are a fascinating assortment of personalities, but no more interesting than the characters gathered here. Today, it is my privilege to call our attention to Thomas, one of the twelve apostles *chosen* by Jesus ... to enrich the fellowship of disciples, to add quality to their discourse, and to be a proxy for many souls like him (in his own day and in the centuries to follow).

Let's seek God's influence together: Our maker and redeemer, for the worth of persons we give you thanks. For the humbling hope that you know our names, care about our stories, know our thoughts, receive our prayers, we give you thanks. Guide us this hour as seek to know and value your son, Thomas. Allow us to own the measure in which we are like him. Help us to grow in our affection and kindness toward any Thomas in our lives. For his story, for his uniquely lived human life, we give you thanks. Now help us to learn from this uncommon man, whose friendship Jesus chose. Amen.

### **Thomas was not a “recruitment mistake”**

There are some who think he was a personnel department blunder. May I remind you that Jesus did not delegate recruitment to a first century head-hunter? There were no venture capital partners vetting the executive team of his start-up. Jesus knew who he wanted and why he wanted them. He read hearts, discerned spirits, then, chose men by name.

In the case of Thomas, it was an inspired draft. Thomas was a value-adding disciple from the get-go. As we shall see, his input raised the level of discussion. He was transparent about his morphing convictions. He asked questions that merited answers. His presence, no doubt, sensitized the disciples to what others outside their circle were thinking. His voice spoke as a proxy for those for whom religious beliefs do not come easily.

Yet, as we shall see, Thomas was a deeply-invested follower of Jesus, prepared to die with him *before* all his questions were answered. He had the courage of his convictions even when they were tentative. We will also find that the fragments of his life recorded in the gospels portray him more favorably than do some of his interpreters who are content with first impressions, derived without study.

Public impressions of his life feature or exaggerate one quality—an inclination to doubt and question. When we perpetuate this image, we draw almost entirely on one quotable line from one memorable moment: "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." By "it" he meant that Jesus is resurrected from the dead, for this is what his friends were telling him. [John 20:25]

This instance of skepticism earned him the title “Thomas the Doubter” or “Doubting Thomas.” There is, of course, no evidence that his friends and fellow disciples applied this pejorative label. While it clearly captures his state of mind during one apostolic dialogue, it is a momentary freeze-frame and unfair to the whole of his story. In fact, the tone of his words and their selection, come off differently when they are read in context.

Yet, when all is said and done, Thomas will remain the patron saint of all minds that have to work their way through intellectual difficulties to embrace and own Christian faith. Those of you who are on an honest quest for a life-ordering faith in a knowable God are especially welcome. As we weigh the merits of Thomas, I hope your place among us is affirmed as well. Were he here, Thomas would

put you at your ease. And the Lord, who loved Thomas, would seek out your company, just as he did his.

### **Thomas had reason to believe and reason to doubt**

According to gospel accounts Thomas had ample reason to believe. He was a witness to the authority Jesus had over evil and illness. He saw the blind acquire sight. He saw the lame stand and dance. He saw bent and possessed minds set free. Thomas was present when Jesus manifested power over the elements. He ate with thousands a meal Jesus multiplied from a few loaves and fish. He saw him walk on water and calm a storm. And Thomas was there when Lazarus was raised from the dead.

Yet, in the moment, he also had reasons to doubt. He saw how powerless (or non-resistant) Jesus was when he was arrested. We don't know if Thomas was present at the crucifixion, but certainly the grief of actual witnesses authenticated his master's death. The one who inspired and empowered him was now gone. The one who had the "words of life" was now silent. His guide was now lost to him.

Those among his fellows, who appeared most courageous, had fled away into the night. The disciples of Jesus were afraid; and fear is a kissing cousin of doubt. If one receives a frightful diagnosis, it can inspire fear for life first and doubt about divine protection second. If one sees (or imagines) hardness in one's parent or spouse or boss, disillusionment may beget fear, and fear may beget doubt—about the health and future of the relationship. When we are at risk, doubt makes a home in our hearts. When someone or something trusted is removed, doubt is not far from our minds.

Remember, first women (friends of Jesus and the disciples) reported that angels said he was alive. Then two of their own number reported that Jesus appeared to them. Still they were in hiding—sorting out their hopes, fears and doubts. Read Luke 24, to refresh your memory. As followers of Jesus, they feared persecution and death. According to John, they were hiding together, except for Thomas, who was not with them. And that sets the stage for our primary text.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side.

*John 20:19-20a<sup>1</sup>*

Did you notice? Who first called attention to the wounds in his hands and side? It was Jesus—as if to say: Look, see these signs; they will strengthen your faith. Before Thomas named the proof he would require, Jesus used his wounds as valid evidence for what had occurred, a genuine resurrection after a documented death. Remember this.

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

*John 20:20b-23*

Twice he bestowed peace, a first (and familiar) effect of his real presence. Then, by his own breath, he bestowed a mystical self-authenticating experience of the Holy Spirit. Last, he bestowed the spiritual authority to apply God's grace to other lives. They were (then and later) to experience God's gracious presence with such potency, that they could credibly assure men and women of divine

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase "for fear of the Jews" needs context. Jesus and his disciples were Jewish themselves and lived in Israel. Some religious leaders found Jesus guilty of blasphemy and supported his crucifixion. (All citations are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.)

forgiveness. Jesus said the Spirit would anoint and animate them with power to speak grace into hearts and set them free.

It's fair to say these 10 disciples were in altered states of belief and doubt after that gathering. What a meeting for Thomas to miss! But he did. You don't want to be absent when major assignments are handed out; nor, certainly, when critical resources are distributed. Should it, regrettably, happen, you would hope for rather complete minutes.

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

*John 20:24-25a*

John must be offering a highly abbreviated version. I cannot imagine that they could have an experience of the kind described without a robust account. Nor, can I imagine that Thomas would not extract a full story from them. We ourselves would have offered or extracted more than: "We have seen the Lord!" It is reasonable to assume that they would have reported everything Jesus did and said, including Jesus calling their attention to his mortal wounds.

But he [Thomas] said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

*John 20:25b*

In context Thomas effectively said, "I want what *he* offered and *you* got—a sensible observation of his mortal wounds." Can't you imagine saying the same? In that moment, he and we might have thought: "Look at you; you are altered by this encounter. You were owned by fear; now you are emboldened by proof sufficient to die for. I want as much and no less."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

*John 20:26-31*

Did Jesus affirm the faith of those who require less evidence? Yes, he did. Did he (before Thomas) find his mortal wounds appropriate evidence for belief in the resurrection? Yes, indeed he did. This gospel is itself written, according to verse 31 above, to provide the evidence of a first hand observer (John), so that grounds for faith might be provided. No doubt, if John had a camcorder in his day, he would have provided visual evidence as well. Then we could all see, and more still would believe.

### **Thomas was not the only apostle to question or doubt**

Our journey of faith is not well served by an unreal picture of the apostles' unshakeable faith. Before their simultaneous multi-witness first-hand encounter with the risen crucified Lord, they all struggled to keep a hold on their faith. The faith-crisis of Thomas gets disproportionate exposure. Between the crucifixion and their own eye-witness resurrection encounters, all the disciples had moments of uncertainty. In fact they questioned the reports of credible associates. In this respect, they were no different than Thomas.

When Jesus rose [from the dead] early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country [on the road to Emmaus]. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.<sup>14</sup> Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

*Mark 16:9-14*

So, we might with equal justification say, “Doubting Peter, Doubting James, Doubting John.” But that would be an equally discourteous caricature. The credibility of apostolic witness is actually strengthened by their initial confusion and doubt.<sup>2</sup> When existing doubt is overcome by compelling facts, we know the proof was sufficient for a skeptic and not the “easy evidence” that satisfies a gullible believer. If someone has no original doubts because he has no original thoughts, then his brand of certainty persuades me not. I prefer the reason and witness of a converted skeptic. This explains the persuasive credibility of Saul-Paul.

Between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus fed and formed the faith of his disciples. For forty days, Jesus gave sensory evidence of his death and resurrection. He revealed the essence and implications of the kingdom of God. Jesus offered sufficient proof and purpose to face martyrdom.

After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

*Acts 1:3-5*

### **Thomas added value to the fellowship of faith**

Jesus knew what he was doing when he admitted Thomas to the inner circle. He was after all inviting ordinary men to walk with God and live with high integrity. Cosmetic posturing would not do. Disingenuous speech and too clever self-presentation would not cut it. Jesus wanted the company of truth-speakers. He knew that those who were honest with themselves were the most teachable. Thomas had heart-felt questions that indicated his openness to transformative answers. His authenticity would be good for the others.

The openness of Thomas about what he did and didn't get gave him a more direct path to truth, with spill-over benefits to other disciples. We've all been in settings where someone asked a question we were thinking, but not inclined to ask. Yet, all present benefited from the answer. It's often a Thomas who sharpens the focus, who frames the context, who articulates the issue for the whole group. Here is just one example. Jesus was speaking of his approaching self-sacrifice and subsequent absence.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am

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<sup>2</sup> Several non-canonical documents were attributed to Thomas, in particular, to borrow his credibility: *Acts of Thomas, Gospel of Thomas, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Book of Thomas*—some expressing Gnostic views.

going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

*John 14:1-5*

How many people have profited from the reply that followed?

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

*John 14:6-7*

There are indications that other disciples learned by observation. Perhaps the immediately subsequent freedom shown by Philip was inspired or encouraged by Thomas' example.

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

*John 14:8-11*

Did you notice the understated distinction in the last sentence Jesus spoke? Believe my words *or* believe my deeds. If you have the discernment to know who is speaking, my words will suffice. If your consciousness is more earth-bound, your first-hand observation of miracles should carry the day. Jesus was mindful of the nuances and subtleties in faith. He knew that on any given day any given disciple might have more faith than his fellows. He also knew that each disciple had special faith (or doubt) for selected issues. Just as courage is mobile and momentary; faith is elastic and contextual.

### **True religion demands authenticity not perfection**

The Jewish and Christian scriptures do not airbrush their heroes. Our existence is complex. We don't get it all clearly or do it all right. One of the surprising delights about people described in the Bible is the credibility of their humanity. The cumulative message is that only our maker is perfect. We do well to desire God's influence and welcome God's guidance. When we do, life works better; we are more joyful and useful; but, still shy of the mark. Pleasing God is more about heart-orientation than behavioral-perfection.

Our faith experience is the same kind of thing. It is not a perfectly sustainable state of mind. It is a rare clear view of God—sufficient to inspire real trust in such a being for our present situation. Strangely, in such moments our trust is not desperately attached to preferred outcomes. God's goodness and attention are enough in themselves. Such states of mind can come in the worst of times and go in the best of times.

Each disciple exercised the degree of faith he had. Sometimes it was adequate for the moment. When it wasn't, they knew it. Jesus was a catalyst for honest self-description. In his company Thomas and the others learned integrity in religious practice. Certainty was not the price of admission. One could approach Jesus with a mere seed of faith *if* one was honest about it.

A boy suffered from a severe affliction. His desperate father pleaded with Jesus: "If you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus said to him, "If you are

able!' All things can be done for the one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

*Mark 9:22-24 (NRS)*

I like the truthful self-awareness in the father. He spoke in the plural, "Help *us*." When anyone we love is afflicted, *we* are afflicted. When we pray for their healing, we pray for our deliverance. I like even more the way he articulates the sometimes coincident experience of faith and doubt, "I believe, help my unbelief." Once again, scripture is realistic about human spirituality. In this brief encounter, Jesus shows his openness and concern for a father who is a proxy for literally millions of kindred spirits. One personal encounter at a time, Jesus removed ambiguities *about* the true nature of faith while displaying compassionate realism for ambiguities *in* our faith experience.

Our *beliefs* are convictions about God's nature. Our *faith* is the capacity to trust God in specific circumstances. Neither grants us immunity from any human affliction or anxiety. Faith exists *between* certainty and doubt. We participate with all humanity in our share of suffering and sorrow; yet, we have hope. And this "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." [Romans 5:3-5]

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." [Hebrews 11:1] Logically, faith must exist in the absence of certainty. Otherwise, it would be knowledge. As such, faith sometimes has a companion, doubt. An episode of doubt does not mean a believer has lost his faith. For faith to be lost, darkness must snuff out the light. Doubt is simply the shadow cast by faith. You know that light casts shadows. Have you also noticed that shadows make light more interesting? This side of heaven, they come with the territory.

### **Why is religious belief more difficult for some than others?**

The legacy of Thomas raises a core question: How is it that some people find faith more easily than others? This is a huge subject. Proper attention would require considerable time; and identify multiple causes. I want to propose three explanations.

Experiential Theology: One plausible cause is found in the family of origin. Children experience theology before they conceptualize it. You might say they encounter "lived doctrines" before they recognize them as the preliminary form of subsequent beliefs. The capacity for abstract thought occurs in early adolescence. Consequently, grace and mercy are experienced (or not) in primary relationships years before they are cognitively processed. When core concepts essential to a healthy religious life are readily available in the lived curriculum of the home, such a child will have familiar and appealing points of reference for maturing religious convictions.

One can argue that the composite memory of one's parents is each person's initial "concept for God." Our parents are experienced as our first providers, the givers of life, the dispensers of justice and mercy, the healers of hurts, the interpreters of worth, the affirmers of identity, and the prescribers of purpose. They are a child's baseline experience for future reflection on God's goodness. When these early images are *not* congruent with God's true nature, faith in a compassionate deity may be problematic. It is a natural migration for children of absent fathers to imagine a disengaged deity. It is not surprising when children of micro-managing mothers flee any form of rule-bound religion, and suspect no other kind is available. Exposure in formative years to an anti-intellectual fundamentalist church (in fearful retreat from secular culture), can taint the memory of "faith" for any one who comes to value learning and cherish life in the wider world.

My point is simply that formative years may create (or withhold) an experiential receptivity to core concepts in belief. The phrase, "our Father, who art in heaven," is a wonderfully accessible, satisfying concept for me because my father is the kindest man I've known. He had an uncommonly smooth temperament and consistently generous nature. For me the "fatherhood of God" is a

nourishing notion. At the same time, I know people who cannot get past the first line of the Lord's Prayer without internal conflict because their fathers were not safe. Their fathers had anger issues, or highly conditional approval, or long seasons of absent disengagement. Others find the "motherhood of God" equally disconcerting. Now, many agnostics can point out what ideal parents they had without any resulting inclination to faith. I will readily grant this. I am merely suggesting that *some* people with difficulty embracing an "I-Thou" relationship as adults may not have experienced an "I-thou" relationship in childhood. Love and trust, faith and commitment are learned relational realities.

Intellectual Integrity: The second explanation is more obvious. The available reasons and evidences for faith in God are not sufficient for everyone. This observation does not discount the intelligence of those with less need for persuasion. Some of the brightest minds in human history had a simple faith. A simple faith does not imply a simple mind. Faith is a way of seeing, like artistic sensibility or interpersonal discernment or human intuition. It transcends measurable intellect. The catalog of extraordinary minds who have claimed a deeply nourishing and fulfilling faith is immense.

Having said that, the more education one has, the more filters there are between you and religious commitments. A post-Enlightenment faith has the burden of reconciliation with more categories of substantive knowledge. And, if one is a specialist in a particular branch of post-Enlightenment knowledge, then he lives with the necessity to square the truths of his discipline with the truths of religion. This is a good process; but it takes time and presents an impediment to faith until core issues are resolved.

More cerebral temperaments have more intellectual integrity issues. They are not stubborn or arrogant; this is how they process life. People who live in their heads come to trust reason over other faculties. Those who live more in their hearts place high confidence in instinct and intuition. Neither way of knowing is *always* better. So, when it comes to religious discernment, we each trust most what has served us best. Heart-centered people can sometimes sense the presence or absence of good will. They trust *their* hearts more than *others'* heads. Mind-centered people, if they embrace faith, want to bring their heads with them. We should not ask them to do otherwise. For them authenticity in faith *requires* intellectual integrity.

One particular man was a member here, not because he believed; but, because he wanted to support the faith appetites in family members. He could see that their faith enriched, even improved them. For his part he could not buy it. He is a brilliant empirically trained scientist; and could not swallow religious conviction. He did, however, consider Jesus a fascinating individual with compelling personal and social ethics. We had periodic conversations about his children's religion. "What can prevent it from becoming aberrant? How can they avoid fundamentalism? Might they spiritualize critical decisions (about marriage, career and finances) which later they will regret?" For years he passed communion elements without partaking. One Sunday he took communion. The next week I called him; and asked what his participation represented. He said, "My heart wants to know God; and my head is willing to watch." He did not stop thinking. He was not about to check his brains like a hat at the church door. His religious longings would no longer allow his mind to hold back his heart.

With or without formal education, intellect-oriented souls have more boxes to check before faith is embraced. C. S. Lewis might be the most popular English-language apologist for Christianity in the twentieth century. Prior to his conversion, he had been an agnostic, if not an atheist, for several decades. I, for one, am glad he circled the airport so many times before landing. This Oxford don inhaled the best contemporary culture had to offer with a wide-awake mind on his way to faith. His mind insisted on satisfying answers, until the Spirit and Word broke into his consciousness with self-authenticating authority. His cognitive journey taught him to navigate the fashions of thought; and trained a voice that those outside the church could hear. I'm glad he was true to himself. I'm glad he doubted with integrity before he believed with integrity.

Conviction and commitment: The third explanation I offer is not often said straight up. Some people do not want God to exist; at least, not the kind of god they imagine. Religious convictions and commitments are not welcome. It is as if their spirits have a sign on the porch: “No Solicitation.” In our day, you should not consider this odd. We live in a time of extreme privatization, when people do not want their carefully crafted comfort zones disturbed. We also live in a time when misperceptions of God are widely circulated.

Even when God is, for the most part, accurately imagined, many people would rather be their own gods. Not everyone in the world wants a divine being in his private life, who can read their thoughts, interpret their motivations, re-order their pleasures and meddle with their plans. It is not the first time God’s creatures have wanted to escape debt and allegiance to their maker. Let’s be honest: How many times have we avoided accountability in our private lives? One major impediment to faith is the desire to be accountable to no one.

Accept the fact that some people prefer to be “a law unto themselves” and “turn every one to his own way” (Proverbs 1:29-31; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 2:14). Some, who don’t *want* God to exist, would rather say they have intellectual issues with faith. A more candid answer might be: “Trust and obey? Not me. Not interested!” There is no intellectual answer for a moral objection—other than to make a case for the enlightened self-interest in pleasing a wise and loving God. Willful disbelief is not a rare state of mind; but, rare are the teachable moments for those who own it.

If we want to be fair-minded, we must recognize our advantage. We—who have tasted the Spirit’s palpable presence, experienced transformative consciousness, lived in the joyful freedoms of grace, and stumbled our way into a true love for God—must admit how easy it is *for us* to desire and trust divine manifestations in our private lives. We have already discovered that gratitude awakens our awareness, that worship expands our wonder, that service deepens our meaning. Before we find others *self*-centered, we must own how profoundly *self*-fulfilling our religious experience is.

### **One person’s piety is another person’s poison**

Do not tolerate in your private assessments any disdain toward the honest spirituality of others—be it simpler or more complex than your own. You will not know in this life who is the “weaker brother,” the one who believes without questioning or the one who questions in order to believe. Our egocentricity is too subtle and deceptive for that to be an objective appraisal. And, God forbid, do not intentionally or accidentally dismantle the meaning-making habits of another heart. These may be stepping stones put in place by the Spirit.

God’s children hold their faith in him differently. One person’s piety can be another person’s poison. We’re not asking the same questions. We’re not recovering from the same afflictions. We’re not nourished by the same books; nor charmed by the same music. We’re not equally sustained by the same spiritual disciplines. Our prayers are, if authentic, unedited self-disclosing self-discoveries of unique natures facing unique circumstances. Our encounters with sacred texts and wisdom literature reveal dissimilar styles and appetites. My wife, Dale, is inclined to daily doses of selected readings. I’m better served by long blocks of time claimed less often that permit repeated readings in multiple versions in one sitting. Truths hold onto her when she finds and lives a single clear principle for the whole of a given day. Truths hold onto me if I marinate my consciousness in their herbs and spices for hours. Both are valid. Each of us find some benefit in the other’s practice; but we prefer our own.

Modern Christians find false security in the owning of many books. Their presence on the shelf is a great distance from heart and mind. Each of us must seek the books, company and experiences that feed inner health and reinforce the realities of faith. We should not be troubled when mates or parents or children or friends are drawn to different soul-food. It is natural that unique temperaments have distinct approaches to faith. Don’t be alarmed to find it in your marriage. Young adults are more likely to marry opposites. They know (through experience and intuition) what is absent or less

developed in their personalities; and are drawn to mates who compliment and complete them. When older adults marry, they are more likely to feature compatibility, having lost (a) some of the energy and elasticity required to resolve differences and (b) some of the naiveté and idealism that made them want to. Dale, my wife, might dryly observe: "We married young."

Remember, many early Christians could not read. The gospels and occasional letters which make up the New Testament were read aloud by a literate member in their local fellowship. Consequently, they committed key insights to memory and simply lived them. A life style formed by a few divinely prescribed principles is enormously fruitful. One could live an entire life with daily attention to the Golden Rule and not suffer many ambiguous decisions.

The necessity of faith and wisdom of doubt: Some faith is necessary. One does not have a substantive relationship with God without a measure of faith. Prayer and worship are non-starters without a seed of faith. And, that faith must be growing to remain relevant. You shouldn't want the faith experience you had 10 years ago. If we are growing, our concept of God is growing. It's that simple.

Some doubt is inevitable; and, occasionally, wise. Days will come when you just don't get it. You will have clarity about what you would do if you were God; yet, obviously, God does not have the same action plan or execution timetable. Events will come into your life (or lives you love) that you find humanly unacceptable—a medical diagnosis, a breach in a primary relationship, an economic reversal, or some other hazard to your quality of life. When such times come your faith can be reactivated, reframed or reinvented, *so that* it will be adequate for the moment. Do not be unsettled if that metamorphosis includes a few pangs of doubt. If the faith you had is not equal to the realities you need to inhabit now, it must shed its old skin in order to grow.

Reverence for orthodoxy and need for closure: The church needs seemingly opposite kinds of Christians. One kind, required in each generation of Christian history, is the guardian of orthodoxy. These souls are compelled to keep watch over doctrinal clarity, historical accuracy and creedal completeness—to insure that the apostolic story of our Lord and Redeemer is preserved intact. Such believers are allergic to vagueness. They monitor the ways we describe God, the dogmas we articulate, the liturgies we read, the hymns we sing—to anchor our thought forms and language to Scripture. They tag any distortion and throw that catch back into the sea. We are all served by their vigilance.

It may be said that every Christian believer needs this instinct in some measure in order to keep their faith grounded and centered. Certain people have a disposition for this approach to faith. It seems to exist in temperaments with a love of order and a need for closure.

Awe for mystery and tolerance for ambiguity: Another kind of Christian is complimentary and essential. In the same house of faith, coming from the opposite polarity, are those with a profound regard for mystery. Their reverence is for the ineffable aspects of God's being, which they find, literally, too wonderful for words. They would rather worship than craft a creed. They prefer open-ended allusions that inspire awe over precise syllogisms that bundle conclusions. In Jewish and Christian faith such souls have been artists and musicians, mystics and prophets, authors of poetry and wisdom literature. These souls wander closer to heresy and are less troubled by the proximity. They implore us to give due attention to the true God beyond the "god" of tight formulae.

It may be said that every Christian believer needs a measure of mysticism if their faith is to be animated by wonder. Certain spirits are fed by expansive imagination. Such temperaments have a tolerance for ambiguity and an appetite for awe.

### **Doubt within the three dimensions of faith**

Faith has three dimensions: what we *believe*, who we *trust*, and how we *live*. Christians who feature one to the neglect of the others have an under-developed faith. Mature souls experience faith as

believing, trusting and doing. Some traditions feature one over the others; but I can't find a single tradition that excludes one. The seeds of doubt can be sown within each, and, when rooted, can stunt spiritual growth.

I believe in order to understand: This statement, borrowed from St. Anselm, declares the cognitive benefits of faith. Every world view employs core convictions as a footing for other constructed understandings. I have yet to meet or read anyone without working presuppositions. Premises yield conclusions. Where we stand determines what we can see. Anselm knew that faith elevated his perspective and extended his cognitive reach. Doubt not only obscures our vision of God, it hinders our understanding of life.

I trust in order to know and be known: Here I state a life lesson. Long ago, I became wary of mistrust; and began to mistrust mistrust. Business contracts and office politics are the necessary inventions of mistrust. A naïve view of the self-interest, competitiveness and insecurities in fellow man would encourage us to set them aside. We can't, of course; but *when* we can, life and work are freer and more enjoyable. When we *don't* practice trust in our relationships, we don't get known because aspects of our selves are in hiding. It is a psychological equation that we do not ask what we are not prepared to disclose; consequently, we do not know another any better than we want to be known ourselves. Mistrust in I-Thou relationship limits our insights into God's nature. It also dilutes a core benefit of "having a deity"—trusting a watchful peace-bestowing Presence.

I do in order to be alive and invested: James applied the teachings of Jesus. If one claims faith, but does not do the works of faith, that person's "faith" is suspect. It would be a trivial religion indeed to *believe* in a compassionate God, place *trust* in such compassion for one's own sake, yet to *do* nothing out of compassion for others. Thomas (like Jesus and James) provokes our awareness that faith must practice integrity in small and subtle things to be authentic in its grand confession. Be Christian—open to the influence of the Spirit of Christ—for a few years, and you will become kind, just and generous. You will find a point of contact between the compassion of God at work in you and concrete needs in the world about you. Doubt discourages these instincts *when* it discounts the image of God in others or questions the value of altruism. Faith overcomes self-interest, and softens our inclination to self-protect, to horde, to disengage.

### **Dealing with Doubt: The "Thomas" in you and the "Thomas" in others**

I'll offer four suggestions on how to relate to Thomas—be he inside or outside you.

Practice Courtesy: You know people with a simpler (more settled) faith than your own. To you, they may appear too pietistic or legalistic, too anti-culture or anti-intellectual, too disengaged or otherworldly. Do not be harsh in attitude or interaction. Don't seek to disassemble a brother's peace and meaning because its style is unbecoming to you. Courtesy asks you not to raise your voice in a Trappist monastery. Some contemplatives *need* to go there.

You also know people with a more complex (less settled) faith than your own. To you, they may appear too skeptical or philosophical, raising too many questions as preconditions to belief or too many issues as prerequisites for trust. When someone is actively pursuing a satisfying answer, let them be. If they ask you a question, give them the explanation that works for you, but don't be offended if it is not adequate for them. Courtesy asks you not to burn books at Oxford. Some seekers *need* to go there.

Seek Substance: Maintain your own quest for a clearer view of God and you will grow in empathy for the quests of others. Each pilgrim must climb his own mountain. Find new and persuasive reasons for the hope within you (again and again). If your understanding is momentarily satisfied, quest for transformative religious experience, quest for social usefulness. Those on a spiritual journey maintain a spirit of humble expectation, and find a natural ease with other pilgrims. Love your God, value

your culture, and you will be able to interpret one for the other. The best way to prepare for dialogue with Thomas is to sustain an honest discourse with the Thomas within your self.

In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

*1 Peter 3:15*

Cultivate Wonder: Our efforts to imagine God clearly, or capture God's being and deeds in tidy creeds, are merely provisional understandings of the true God (as God knows God). The immensity and grandeur of God absolutely exceed our current working concepts. The more we see God in true scale, the more graciously we hear a seeker or skeptic's "primitive" theology. God roams freely beyond the reach of your mind. Allow others to think wild thoughts about God. Seekers, without the constraints of orthodoxy, can have fresh, potent and enticing insights into God's being. Informed worship does not permit spiritual condescension. A sincere humility, compelled by awe, forbids it.

Our efforts to be ethical are merely approximations of goodness—moral gestures which (in motive and method) barely resemble divine righteousness. God's holiness transcends human thought and behavior. We neither grasp, nor duplicate it. We are moral alchemists. Yet, in the lab of conscience, our experiments are noble and worthy—especially, when they spring from love or worship. Do not imagine your experiments more worthy than your neighbor's.

Develop Skills: It's not always easy to dialog with those who don't share your beliefs. Some of those most passionate about their religion (and politics) are least able to have constructive discussion. I encourage you to expand your desire and competencies. A 6-week course is planned for the fall. This class will feature tools for conversation between people with different convictions. It will be useful to you if you want meaningful dialogue with those in your life who do not share your faith (or doubt). Most of us have relatives with alternative convictions. We all have (or should have) friends with different world views. Some Christians cannot understand or relate effectively with those who (a) believe in God but not in Jesus or (b) have difficulty believing in God at all. Some theists and agnostics are bewildered by Christians, and cannot grasp how they arrive at their convictions. Consider bringing a guest to *Christians, Theists, Agnostics: Seeking Dialogue with Mutual Respect*. (See pages 12 and 13 for a preview.)

### **Our last impression of Thomas**

A significant but passing reference to Thomas is rarely noticed.

Then he [Jesus] said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." "But Rabbi," they said, "a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?"

*John 11:7-8*

The disciples knew a return visit was hazardous to their health. When Jesus was in danger, so were they. They made a case for not going, minimizing the need to visit their sick friend Lazarus.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

*John 11:14-16*

Thomas, with his doubts and provisional understandings, was prepared to die with and for Jesus. Did Thomas have *less* courage or faith than the other disciples? Did Thomas have *more* doubt than they did? Would Jesus have loved him less *if* he did? I doubt it.

## **CHRISTIAN, THEIST, AGNOSTIC**

### **Seeking Dialogue with Mutual Respect**

This course will feature tools for conversation between people with different convictions. It will be useful to believers who want free and meaningful dialogue with those who do not share their faith. Our lives are populated with people who *we* value highly and who value *us*, but *not* our faith. They might say we don't understand or respect their doubt. Yet, we still love each other.

Many practice the etiquette of avoidance: "It is impolite to discuss politics and religion." Odd, really—considering that our core self-understanding and life-ordering ideals are formed by religious and political convictions. Here, the terms "liberal" and "conservative" find their most passionate and interesting use. Liberals and conservatives share homes, employers, social settings, faith communities, and friendships; why can't they talk more freely about their core beliefs and values?

All healthy souls search for meaning and make value-driven decisions. They want self-respect and a life found credible by others. Many commit to causes larger than their own comfort. We have more (and less) in common than we know. We are like random tourists bumping elbows in the Sistine Chapel, while gazing up in private wonder. It is time we find ways to ask: Why are *you* here; and what are *you* seeing?

**When:** 9:00 AM on October 7, 14, 21, 28 and November 4, 11

**Where:** Douglass Hall at Saratoga Federated Church

**Teacher:** Arvin Engelson, Pastor of Care Ministries

*Always be prepared to give an answer  
to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.  
But do this with gentleness and respect.*

1 Peter 3:15

# CHRISTIAN, THEIST, AGNOSTIC

## Sample Topics

### *Cross-conviction Dialogue*

Beyond debate and defensiveness  
Religious categories and faith-based language  
Your “truth,” my “truth” and *the* Truth

### *Common Ground Perspectives*

Progressive revelation and our maturing God-concepts  
The Christian debt to Jewish monotheism  
Temperaments, skill-sets and spirituality

### *Impediments to Faith*

Inoculations against religion: Familial, cultural, educational  
Post-Enlightenment assumptions and I-Thou experience  
Idolatry: The beguilement of lesser “gods” and competitive “devotions”

### *Family Matters*

Your “god,” my “god” and *our* children’s religion  
When young believers attend secular universities  
Referred pain: When the issue-on-the-table isn’t the issue

### *Honest Difficulties*

Closed systems: Personality-cults, group-think and fundamentalism  
False dichotomies: Science vs. religion; reason vs. faith; *if* God is good ...  
The uniqueness of Christianity in a room full of religions

### *Action Options*

Excavating common foundations: A catalog of agreements  
Humility and obedience: Honest intellectual impasse or willful disbelief?  
Exercising the measure of faith you have (sometimes together)