

Doubt and Belief
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Acts 4:32-35

³² Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³ With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵ They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

John 20:19-31

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.'

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

"Do not doubt but believe." This thing that Jesus says *after* Thomas has stated, "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," and after Jesus has told Thomas to do exactly those things, this thing is not a chide as we tend to hear it. The language certainly does not have the connotation of insult or inferiority with which we use "doubting Thomas" today. You see, *καὶ μὴ γίνου ἄπιστος ἀλλὰ πιστός* is appropriately translated as "and do not become unbelieving but believing." Reach out your hand and put it in my side and do not become unbelieving but believing. The language of this reading from the New Revised

Standard Version of our Bible calls the opposite of the state of belief as a state of doubt. Whether you prefer to call it doubt or unbelief, it lives on the opposite end of a spectrum of belief, a range which is far more gray than black-and-white.

Even those things we hold to be absolute truths can move along that spectrum. For example, have you ever wondered if what you see as “blue” looks entirely different to everyone else individually, but, however it looks, you’ve all been taught it’s blue so you agree? Even things you would never question can be subject to doubt, even if only for a moment.

That word “pistos,” believing, and its counterpart “apistos,” unbelieving, derive from the Greek word *πειθώ*, or “peithó,” which means “to persuade.”¹ We can be persuaded toward belief or dissuaded from it, persuaded toward doubt or dissuaded from it. Jesus gives Thomas evidence to persuade him, just as he did for the others the week before, and says, for all to come, us included, that blessed are those who are persuaded to believe without the physical evidence of his return. What we have are these things which are written to persuade us toward belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God.

It is true that my task here is to persuade you firmly toward the believing end of the spectrum. As part of my ordination, I vowed to pray for, serve, proclaim to, teach, and care for this church in the name of, and to the best of my ability in the manner of, Jesus Christ. It is my sincerest hope that, in so doing, I do persuade you toward belief in the goodness, mercy, lovingkindness, and salvation of God. But it’s not up to me alone. No, we turn to the book of Acts over and over again for examples on how to “be” church. Today’s reading is no exception. Luke writes that the “whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul... With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” Through our actions as church we persuade one another as well.

That persuasion, of pastor *and* parishioner, can go either way – toward belief or toward unbelief – can’t it? It saddens me to say that some of the louder voices in the Christian church today are far better at dissuading others – the news is filled with people being hateful in the name of Christ. And in our everyday lives, in smaller ways, we’ve known people who call themselves Christians who have done un-Christian things; it’s even possible that some of us have been those people. I know I have regrettably fit that description at times.

Why does it matter? What does any of us gain if we believe? John makes it clear: through believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, you have life in his name. Not the I’m-upright-and-taking-nutrition kind of life. No, abundant life. Earlier in John, Jesus says he came so that those who

¹ <http://biblehub.com/greek/4103.htm>

believe may have life, and have it abundantly.² Abundant life is life unconstrained by a false sense of control and a misguided sense of what matters. Abundant life is life in which we have been freed to pray for, serve, proclaim to, teach, and care for the children of God. When we lean toward the unbelief end of the spectrum, those constraints weigh more heavily upon us, we place greater importance on self-reliance, we have more fear. When we persuade others in that same direction, they lose the same freedom. That's why it matters.

Are we pushing people away from God or toward God by the things we do, the words we say? Do our hands reach to bring people closer or push people to keep their distance? It matters that we are Easter people throughout the year – joyful and confident in the promise of the resurrection which we celebrate most boldly on Easter Sunday. And in those seasons of life when we find it hard to be church people, much less Easter people, then what? “Now the whole group of those who believed...” What do we, as a collective group of believers, aim to be doing all along? Persuading. Should one of us hurt and fade in belief, do we stop praying for, serving, proclaiming to, teaching, and caring for? I hope not.

Thomas, who needed to be persuaded, just like the rest had been, was told “Peace be with you. Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not become unbelieving but believing.” Is this how *we* encounter the world? Speak peace first? Offer evidence that the good news is that God loves us so very, very much? Give others an opportunity to experience the goodness of God in us? Assure others that this, despite seeming too good to be true, is worthy of belief? I hope so.

I know that I could stand to be reminded of this every day – speak peace first, offer God's love and goodness, encourage belief not unbelief. “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Ever-living God, grant that we might be those who speak and live goodness in your name, we pray. Amen.

² John 10:10.