

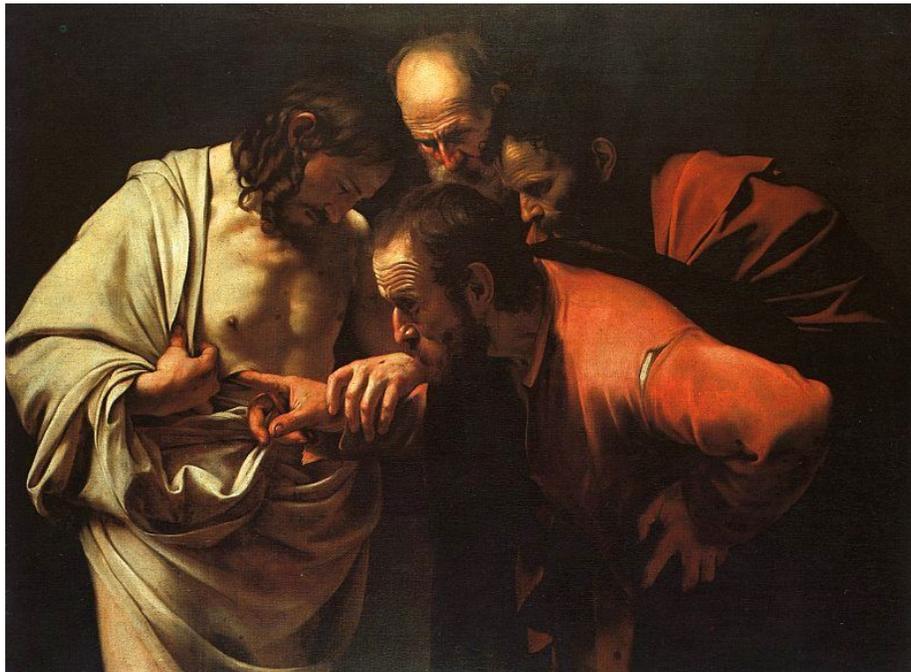


OUR DAILY BREAD
Resources for Spiritual Questers

Doubt and Grow Spiritually

-Rev. Hugh Odhner

A sermon delivered at the Philadelphia Society of the Lord's New Church



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Readings

Luke 24:1-11

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.¹

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John 20:3-16

Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Secrets of Heaven* §7298

“[...] it is in accordance with the laws of order that no one should become convinced of a truth in a moment, that is, that no truth should instantaneously be made so sure that a person is left in no doubt at all about it. The reason for this is that when truth is impressed on a person in that way, he becomes so fully convinced of it that it cannot be broadened in any way, and also he is incapable of yielding. This goes to explain why in the next life as soon as some truth is presented through plain experience to good spirits, some opposing idea giving rise to doubt is presented. In this way they are led to think and ponder over whether it is indeed a truth, gather reasons in support of it, and so introduce that truth into their minds rationally. This enables their spiritual vision in respect to that truth to be broadened, seeing even into the ideas that are opposed to it.

They therefore see and perceive with their understanding every characteristic of a truth, and from this are able to let in the influences coming from heaven as the situation demands; for truths take varying forms according to circumstances.”²

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² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Arcana Coelestia*. London: Swedenborg Society., 1983.

This is a sermon about doubt. It takes for its text the doubt expressed by the apostle Thomas. It is perhaps appropriate that we speak about Thomas the doubting apostle today, because the Lord appeared to him exactly one week later than he appeared to the other apostles, that is one week later than that first Easter.

But let us begin with that first Easter Morning -- what was it like? It was NOT one of jubilant expectation of seeing the risen Lord.

In regard to expectations, the women came to the tomb expecting to find the Lord's body. As we read from the gospel of Luke: *"(the women) came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. ... they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ... they were greatly perplexed."*

That first Easter morning was one of disbelief and doubt. When the women told the 11 apostles what they had found -- or not found -- and what they had heard from the two men in shining garments, what was the reaction of the apostles? We read that: *"(the women's) words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them."*

However, Peter and John ran to the tomb, entered it, found no body -- so what did they do? They went away again to their own homes.

And Mary Magdalene (remember, she had been at the tomb earlier with the group of women), she now was standing outside by the tomb weeping. Why? *"Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."* She still thought that the Lord's body had been moved, and she asked the man who she thought was the gardener, *"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."* It was only when the Lord, the gardener as she supposed, spoke her name that she then recognized the risen Lord.

Later, when the risen Lord first appeared to the apostles saying *"Peace be to you,"* it is said in Luke, *"... they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a ghost. And He said to them, why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"* Only when He showed them his hands and his feet, did they begin to believe.

This doubt is all summed up by the apostle Thomas, who was not with them when Jesus appeared to the other 10 apostles. Even after the other 10 disciples told him *"We have seen the Lord!"* He said to them, *"Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."*

Just like the other apostles he could not truly believe that the Lord had risen until he had seen Him with his own eyes and seen the wounds on his feet, hands, and side.

Why did they all doubt and have such disbelief?

-- The Lord had told them on *four different occasions* that he would be crucified and would rise again on the third day. Even the priests and Pharisees knew this. As the gospel of Matthew tells us, *"The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, 'Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first.'" Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone."* (Matthew 27:62-66)

-- The apostles had witnessed probably hundreds of miracles, including his raising Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus from the dead.

Yet it appeared that they had forgotten his prophecies and now doubted His power. Perhaps it was precisely because they had witnessed his doing so many miracles, even calming storms, that when he did not save himself from the crucifixion and come down from the cross -- even they began to doubt His power. After all it is one thing to raise others from the dead; it is quite another thing to raise yourself from the dead after you're dead.

Perhaps also their faith and belief were tested and came into doubt when they heard the people, the soldiers, and the priests mocking him and saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" "You who destroy the temple and build *it* in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross." "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

We can best understand this if we put ourselves in the place of his disciples, those who had most closely followed him and heard him, had witnessed his miracles and power, and then wondered why He did not save Himself? If we had been there, would our faith have been tested and our beliefs tempted? After all it is difficult to maintain a belief which is unpopular and contrary to the beliefs of a majority, a belief which others will condemn you for if you should speak about it. Isn't it much easier and much safer just to keep quiet and go along with the crowd? Indeed such thoughts may cause us to doubt the truth of what we believe.

The New Church has several teachings on the subject of doubt which may shed some light on what was going through the minds of the apostles and also why they had such a difficult time accepting that the Lord had risen from the dead, as he had told them he would, until they had seen him with their eyes.

Secrets of Heaven §1820. *Anyone who is undergoing temptation experiences doubt ... And the greater a person's love is, the more it is in doubt. Unless that which a person loves is placed in doubt, and even in despair, there would be no temptation.*

It was the apostles' love for the Lord and belief in his teachings that was now being placed in doubt and tested.

Secrets of Heaven §2334. *All temptation entails feelings of doubt regarding the Lord's presence and mercy, regarding salvation, and other things such as these; for people who experience temptation suffer mental distress, even to the point of despair, in which state they are kept for the most part so that at length they may be confirmed in the conviction that all things are subject to the Lord's mercy, that they are saved through Him alone, and that with themselves there is nothing but evil - convictions in which they are strengthened through conflicts in which they are victorious.*

Seen in the light of this teaching, we can see that the faith of the apostles was brought into despair and temptation in order that it could become stronger. We can see an image of this with the apostle Peter, usually regarded as the headstrong apostle, who said before the Lord's trial and crucifixion, that he would never deny the Lord, and yet went on to deny him three times. He, like the rest of the apostles, at first doubted that the Lord had risen from the dead as we read in the gospel of John. But after seeing the risen Lord, he never again swayed from his faith in the Lord even enduring persecution and death for his faith. So also with the rest of the apostles. Their faith was tempted and brought into doubt, and then strengthened so firmly that they spread the Lord's teachings, beginning at Jerusalem, throughout the Roman world and then throughout the world.

And here is a third teaching concerning doubt that has application to us and our doubts, perhaps even doubts we may have concerning the teachings of the Word.

Secrets of Heaven §7298. *It is in accordance with the laws of order that no one should become convinced of a truth in a moment, that is, that no truth should instantaneously be made so sure that a*

person is left in no doubt at all about it. The reason for this is that when truth is impressed on a person in that way, he becomes so fully convinced of it that it cannot be broadened in any way, and also he is incapable of yielding.

(Have you ever met someone who is so convinced of his beliefs that he will never yield at all and also narrow-minded in respect to those beliefs?)

Secrets of Heaven §7298 (continued). *This goes to explain why in the next life as soon as some truth is presented through plain experience to good spirits, some opposing idea giving rise to doubt is presented. In this way they are led to think and ponder over whether it is indeed a truth, gather reasons in support of it, and so introduce that truth into their minds rationally. This enables their spiritual vision in respect to that truth to be broadened, seeing even into the ideas that are opposed to it. They therefore see and perceive with their understanding every characteristic of a truth, and from this are able to let in the influences coming from heaven as the situation demands; for truths take varying forms according to circumstances.*

But let us go back to Thomas, who became most famous for his doubt, even though all the other apostles had been just as doubting.

The Lord said to Thomas, *“Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.”*

Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”

And Jesus said to him, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

That last sentence is addressed to us living today. Unlike the apostles, we may not have directly seen the Lord with our eyes, but do we believe in the Lord? Perhaps we also, like the apostles were, are in doubt. Many in the world around us are. But as we saw with the apostles, and as we read in the teachings of the New Church, doubt is not bad. It may be the means by which our faith and belief is strengthened. The question we need to ask ourselves is, what are we doing with our doubt? Are we

honestly looking for answers? Are we actively investigating and pondering over whether the Lord's teachings are true? And then if we come to the conclusion that they are true, are we introducing that truth into our minds and lives?

Let us look again at the words that the Lord spoke to Thomas: *“Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* Thomas, like the rest of the apostles, was convinced that the Lord had risen from the dead only because he had seen with his own eyes the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. But the Lord said that those who believe without seeing Him were blessed. How then do we believe without seeing? We are first introduced to truths by means of the Word, and then by considering their teachings in the light of reason. The teachings of the New Church actually encourage us to do this. The Lord wants us to use our understanding and reason in determining what we believe so that we may then live according to what is true by our own choice.

So when the Lord said that those are blessed who believe without seeing, He was referring to our coming to believe in Him and his teachings not only because we understand them, but because we have experienced their truth by actually living them. Our belief and faith are first based upon our understanding of the teachings of the Lord's Word. When we study His Word, praying for and seeking enlightenment from the Lord, and come to have a faith that is based upon enlightened reason -- a faith that makes sense to us -- it is not enough to stop there; we need to do something with that faith. We need to start living according to it. When we have a faith in the Lord based upon his Word, and have put that faith into practice in our lives, then we are blessed.

Amen.

