



# *The Touch of Doubt*

*Joy Barnitz, MDiv., PhD*



## *September 2018*

The inspiration for the title of the sermon was the famous painting by Caravaggio: The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, painted in 1601-1602. I want to take a moment to point out a couple of things about this painting. Caravaggio is “known for his gritty realism”<sup>1</sup> and that’s a good description of what we see here. Note that Jesus’s left hand is guiding Thomas’ right hand into Jesus’ wound. We can see Thomas’ surprise and his reflexive grasp of his own side with his left hand. Doesn’t it make you want to clutch your own side? Note also the texture of the robes, the musculature of Jesus’ body, and the focused attention of the other two apostles, who are watching Thomas put his finger in Jesus’ wound. I find the presence of these two additional men invites me into the picture as another observer ... as if I were also a disciple. Take a moment and notice how you feel as you look at this image. Who do you identify with? Are you a bit uncomfortable? Do you share Thomas’ incredulity? Do you share Thomas’ doubt that Jesus was really there in the flesh?

Our reading from Deuteronomy comes from the end of a chapter<sup>2</sup> that begins with a description of the blessings that the people of Israel will receive “if (they) will only obey (God) by diligently observing all his commandments ...” Then come the warnings of what will happen if they disobey: each blessing is reversed and becomes a curse. The bulk of the chapter is made up of descriptions of the pain the people will suffer from plagues, from being conquered by their enemies. It’s the fierce talk of the God of the Hebrew Bible who often appears as a strict and forbidding Father. The child in me asks: What will happen if I express doubts about God? God knows me intimately, and God will know that I doubted. Is it safe even to let myself be aware of my doubts? Won’t God know about my unconscious doubts? As the psalmist says, even in the depths, God is there.<sup>3</sup>

Surely this fear of doubt is not what the God of love and compassion intended! ... Is it?

Let’s turn to our Gospel reading. This section of the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John comes immediately after the discovery of the empty tomb by Simon Peter and the other disciple; after Mary Magdalene sees Jesus and thinks he is the gardener until he calls her by name. Mary has told the

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20180407802681594&code=ACT&RC=54170&Row=3> (accessed 7 April 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy Chapter 28.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 139 is one example; there are several other examples

disciples that she had seen the Lord. We read of the disciples gathering together and Jesus appearing to them. But Thomas missed that meeting and didn't believe the others had seen Jesus. So a week later, the scene repeats nearly exactly, except that this time Thomas is present. This is the moment Caravaggio captured in the painting: the moment that Thomas puts his finger in the wound in Jesus' side. For Thomas, the sight of Jesus is not sufficient, nor is the sound of Jesus' voice saying "Peace be with you." So Thomas accepts Jesus' invitation and confirms Jesus' real, material presence through that most intimate sense: by touch. Thomas confirms that Jesus is really there, alive, embodied.

We usually focus on the doubt Thomas expresses when the other disciples tell him they have seen the Lord: "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 on Jesus' reply: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Thomas needed to touch, seeing and hearing were not enough. And I find myself wondering: would I have seen and believed or would I have needed to touch, as Thomas did? If these people who had shared Jesus' journeys throughout his ministry had trouble believing in the resurrected Christ, how can I live up to this expectation of believing without having that direct sensual experience of seeing? Hearing? Touching? How can I not doubt?

I find myself wondering: is it okay to doubt?

Certainly we're in good company when we doubt! The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Justin Welby, recently shared his experience with doubt:<sup>4</sup>

He told an audience at Bristol Cathedral that there were moments where he wondered, "Is there a God? Where is God?" Then, asked specifically if he harbored doubts, he responded, "It is a really good question. ... The other day I was praying over something as I was running, and I ended up saying to God, 'Look, this is all very well, but isn't it about time you did something, if you're there?'"

That's not what I expected from an Archbishop! Another example is provided by Mother Teresa's "... posthumous diaries (which) revealed that she was tormented by a continual gloom and

---

<sup>4</sup> Baird, Julia, *Doubt as a Sign of Faith* (accessed 7 April 2018)  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/26/opinion/julia-baird-doubt-as-a-sign-of-faith.html>

aching to see, or sense, God.” She prayed that she “... might not spoil His work and that ... there is such a terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead.”<sup>5</sup> Not exactly the saintly confidence I was expecting! In a 2014 column in the New York Times, Julia Baird observed:

“Just as courage is persisting in the face of fear, so faith is persisting in the presence of doubt. Faith becomes then a commitment, a practice and a pact that is usually sustained by belief. But doubt is not just a roiling, or a vulnerability; it can also be a strength. Doubt acknowledges our own limitations and confirms — or challenges — fundamental beliefs, and is not a detractor of belief but a crucial part of it. ... If we don’t accept both the commonality and importance of doubt, we don’t allow for the possibility of mistakes or misjudgments. While certainty frequently calcifies into rigidity, intolerance and self-righteousness, doubt can deepen, clarify and explain.”<sup>6</sup>

Could it be that the story of “Doubting Thomas” is included in John’s Gospel to let us know that it’s okay to doubt? In fact, that doubt may be necessary for spiritual growth and for deepening our relationship to God? Jesus is patient with Thomas’ (and the others’!) doubts and provides reassurance. We see the loving, compassionate Jesus who, although seeming to rebuke Mary, the disciples and especially Thomas, is telling us that it’s okay for us to be what we are: human. And to be human is to question, to experiment, to doubt. This doubt allows us to repent (turn again) and reform ourselves. This doubt deepens, clarifies and explains. This is doubt that leads us on the path of regeneration, as we form ourselves for heaven by our lives in this world.<sup>7</sup>

Questioning is a deeply rooted habit with me, my questions and doubts forged my personal journey of faith formation. My need to validate my lived experience through my own thought process found expression in my work life as a scientist and product developer. A core concept from the Swedenborgian faith tradition that formed me puts it this way:

---

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Heaven and Hell*. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010.

[N]o one should be instantly persuaded about the truth – that is, the truth should not be instantly so confirmed that there is no doubt left. The reason is that truth inculcated in this way is ‘second hand’ truth – it has no stretch and give ... it is hard, impervious ... <sup>8</sup>

I don’t take this to mean that there is no truth. Instead, I take this to mean that if I don’t engage with and wrestle with something presented to me, I don’t really understand it. I’m passively accepting something rather than doing the work that’s necessary to make it my own and thus to integrate my beliefs into how I live my life.

I come back to the Caravaggio painting of that intimate moment when Thomas puts his finger in Jesus’ wounded side; in my imagination, I step into the scene. This story tells me that through God’s word, I am “in touch” with God. Through Scripture, I can see, hear, even touch Jesus. We know from the many miracle stories in the Gospels that to be touched by Jesus, or to touch Jesus or his clothes, is to be healed ... if we truly believe. In our daily lives we are careful who we touch and how we touch others. When we are in crowded situations many of us “pull ourselves in” so that unavoidable bumps aren’t experienced as invasive or intimate. We speak of being “touched by” something that we see or hear. Part of the joy of making something with our hands, of building something, of gardening, of sewing or knitting is experienced through our sense of touch: we feel the grain of wood, the smoothness of metal, the moistness of the soil, the texture of the fabric and yarn. Through touch, we know these materials in a way beyond just the words. Touch is intimate, relational, connecting. <sup>9</sup>

For me, this is the deep message, this is the gift that God gives us in this story of doubting Thomas: our God loves us, wants to know us deeply, intimately. God wants to be in relationship with and connected to each of us and to all of us. God wants to touch our hearts and enliven our daily lives. And so, we are given the gift of doubt in order that we can build our own faith in which we create a unique relationship to God that has “stretch and give.”

May it be so. Amen.

---

<sup>8</sup> Dole, George F. *A Thoughtful Soul: Reflections from Swedenborg*. West Chester: Chrysalis Books, 1995. p. 14. From Dole’s translation of *Arcana Coelestia (Heavenly Secrets)* no. 7298:2

<sup>9</sup> The sections on touch are informed by two passages from Swedenborg’s *Conjugial Love*: No. 210 and No. 396