



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
Pasadena, California

The Incredulity Of St. Thomas

A Sermon Preached by James Carroll¹

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In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier. Amen

So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.”

But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the prints of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

I will not believe unless I see for myself....

I will not believe unless I touch it....

I will not believe unless....

Unless....

My faith is conditioned on my own perception, on reason, on the test, one might say, of the Scientific Method. I will not believe just on the word of someone else, of authority, of doctrine. We so love Thomas, our Doubting Thomas, because, of course, we recognize in him, of all of those figures, a version of ourselves. Indeed, we could say that we recognize in him the first modern person – a person prepared to put the insistent “I” ahead of the authoritative community. How do I know that I exist? Not because the Book of Genesis tells me, nor because my parents told me, nor because of the tradition. I know I exist because “I think, therefore I am” – the autonomous individual who insists upon his or her own right to be convinced. “Show me.” – “Show *me*.” What was the American Revolution? “We hold these truths to be self evident” – truths not from the King, not from the Church, not from God, but from the self and the self’s perception.

Jesus rebuked Thomas, as religious authority rebuked, say, Galileo, who declared, in effect, “Unless I can see it with my telescope, I will not believe that the Sun moves around the Earth.” The Inquisition forced the issue with Galileo; yet, having renounced what he had seen through his telescope, and having affirmed the doctrine that the Earth is the unmoving center of the Cosmos, still he muttered under his breath, “Yet, it moves.”

And so with, say, Isaac Newton, who insisted, in effect, “I will not believe as truth anything that refuses to submit to the method of experiment and deduction. The glories of critical intelligence follow from such insistence on the knowledge that can be tested. The Age of Faith gave way to the Age of Reason. Doubting Thomas could be claimed as its patron.

The Scientific Method as applied to religion means that human experience can trump doctrine. Human experience can trump doctrine. The most important instance of this principle is the Holocaust. No dogma was

more sacred than that the Christian Church had superseded Judaism, leaving Jews no reason to exist as a religion, as a people, ultimately as individuals. No idea had firmer hold on the Christian imagination than that the Jews had murdered Jesus Christ – Christ killers! Yet when the world saw where those ideas had led once the Nazis had perverted them further – they led to Auschwitz – the Church, certainly the Church of which we are part of here, renounced those ideas. Experience overturned the most solemn doctrines of all.

“But it moves.” This is a function of modernity, and every religion must face modernity – ethics over theology, experience over doctrine. So Jews must test ancient assumptions about “The Land” as the seal of the Covenant God has made with Israel, test those assumptions against the here and now challenges of the war between Israelis and Palestinians. What is “The Land” now? The worldwide Anglican Communion divides between those who give primacy to doctrinaire notions of marriage and holy orders and those who see the cruel exclusion of gays and lesbians and others as an affront to everything Jesus meant. Islam hears the voices of women demanding to have their experience weighed equally in the scale with tradition. Evangelical Christians say “No” to any experience, any evidence that contradicts the dogma of Biblical inerrancy. Catholics ask whether the last Medieval structure of authority will hold fast against a global move toward experienced democratic liberalism.

“Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.” Thomas here shows himself to be the ultimate modernist: *my* experience, *my* experiment, *my* deduction. We love him for it. Caravaggio’s great painting, “The Incredulity of St. Thomas,” shows the moment when the doubting apostle has *actually inserted* his forefinger into the gaping wound in the side of Christ. The expression on Christ’s face is one of stunned ecstasy, reminiscent of the expression on the face of Bernini’s “St. Theresa,” as if, for Christ, the reckoning is with a creature who has finally penetrated – and yes, there is that implication of coitus in the painting – penetrated to the core mystery of creation. A creature *dared!*

And isn’t that what science has been enabling humans to do? Galileo was condemned because the Inquisition feared that the nobility of the human being would be dethroned if the Earth were not the center, and humanity not the pinnacle of all that exists. “What are we, O Lord, that you are mindful of us?” Then humanity is just, well, a speck of dust in a flash of time on a minor planet in an insignificant solar system on the edge of a nothing galaxy. But wait. Here is what Galileo gave us: humanity is the speck of dust – to paraphrase Stephen Hawking – that *knows*. The speck of dust that knows . . . knows not just the Earth, but knows the unbounded Cosmos. *Homo sapiens*, the creature who knows, became then – *then* – *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the creature that knows that it knows. There is the glory of human consciousness; there is the glory of the human person.

And how do we know? By putting our finger in the wound? But wait! Not Caravaggio, but the text. Here is the text: “Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands, and put your hand, and place it in my side.’” Do not be incredulous, but believing. “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God.’” Thomas, that is, did not do it. *He did not do it!* He did not put his hand in the side of Christ; he did not depend on that ultimate experiment, that physical test, that penetration. He found belief without doing it, without doing what he said he would have to do.

Galileo was right, of course, in his promotion of the scientific method – and of course you recall that in 1992 Pope John Paul II said that the Catholic Church was wrong to condemn Galileo. What was the Church trying to defend back then? That there is more to knowing than science; there is more to believing than touching with your hand. The tragic post-Galileo split between science and religion has been a catastrophe for both: science without conscience; faith without a mind – nuclear weapons; rank superstition.

“My Lord and my God.” How, with critical intelligence, can one come to such belief? There is our question: how with critical intelligence can one come to such belief? *Homo sapiens*: the creature who knows. *Homo*

sapiens sapiens: the creature that knows that she knows. But it does not stop there. That consciousness is as open-ended as the Cosmos, capable – as Galileo showed – of reaching to the infinite reaches of space and time. That consciousness knows itself as not being a dead end; its journey is leading somewhere. That journey involves an arithmetic in the universe according to which chaos and anguish and fear and loneliness all add up to something, add up to *meaning*. And the calculator in which that addition occurs is the human person. Consciousness itself is the opening to transcendence, and to the experience – not dogma – that transcendence is not indifferent. *Homo sapiens sapiens sapiens* – the creature who knows that she knows in that experience is known.

“My Lord and my God.” Thomas so experienced himself – *himself* – as known that he believed. The experience was beyond proof, which is why, finally, he had no need to touch – which is why, finally, in affirming the Resurrection, our Easter faith, we have no need to insist, say, on resuscitation, as if the Resurrection was the reassembly of the atoms and molecules of the decomposing corpse of Jesus. Our faith is not in molecules; our faith is in the experience we have of being known. Our religion gives us language in which to express the inexpressible experience – the language, above all, of food and drink.

In truth we do not know much. The only speck of dust in the Cosmos that knows; in truth we do not know much. We don’t know exactly who it is that knows us, or why. Enough to know that this quick journey of life is not a dead end. That is what the Resurrection means. Enough to know that in Jesus, and in those who follow him, we see more than is before our eyes. What Jesus told Thomas was, “If you want to see me again, you are going to have to look at these fellows of yours whom you find so unbelievable. Be with them. If you want to be with me, be with them.” That means, of course, *us* – you being with me; me being with you; us with each other, knowing only what we know, but knowing it together – which is our way of being known.

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