



Embracing the Uncertainty

Thomas, called the Twin, who was one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. When the disciples said, “we have seen the Lord”, he answered, “Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe” (John 20: 24-29).

I must confess that I've always had quite a bit of sympathy for “Doubting Thomas”. It seems such a very human reaction to me to express incredulity at Jesus' resurrection and to want to verify the event by reliance on one's own senses. We doubt many things that we haven't seen with our own eyes or perceived with our other senses. We are a society that demands proof as a matter of course. Business cannot function without written contracts; academic research builds on earlier (written) research results; the legal system insists on proof before a conviction can be recorded. We wouldn't dream of taking a financial institution's word as to our account balance – we must check the statement ourselves. MRIs and other technologically complex tests are necessary to probe and verify our illnesses. We cannot leave the country without a passport; nor can we be considered to even “exist” without a birth certificate; and we're only officially “dead” when the Death Certificate is entered into the public record.

This wasn't always the case. The Venerable Bede, for example, completed the writing of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731. Bede was born in Northumbria in about 673 AD. At the age of seven he was given by his parents into the care of the Benedictines at the monastery of Saint Peter in Wearmouth in north-east England. In 682, Bede was transferred to a joint-foundation at Jarrow and there he remained as a monk until his death in 735. In the Preface to his history, Bede assures his readers that they can trust in all that he has written because, he states, “I am not dependent on any one person, but on countless faithful witnesses who either know or remember the facts”. That is, for Bede, the authenticity of his history comes not only from earlier written accounts but also from a variety of trusted oral and traditional sources. It is Bede's words, and the words of those he trusted, that are presented as the impeccable credentials on which the veracity of his work rests.

For us today, as for Thomas all those centuries ago, the issue is not so clear-cut. Thomas is also known as Didymus, the “twin”. He may or may not have been an actual twin but he certainly stands as a representative of the “double-sidedness” and inherent confusion of human nature. Like all of us, Thomas had doubt and Thomas had faith, sometimes almost simultaneously. Thomas, too, prefigures our own age in which the scientific method is regarded as the only acceptable means of validation of phenomena. The debates that rage around religious and doctrinal questions are encapsulated in Thomas and his reaction to the Resurrection. Like today’s nay-sayers, Thomas has confused Faith and Proof, and as the American writer and activist, Anne Lamott, has insightfully said: “The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty”. The Easter experience, and Christ’s Resurrection is about faith, not proof. As people of the 21st century we cannot have any proof that Jesus rose from the dead, we can only have faith. We can seek for certainty but, two thousand years down the track, the material evidence of that certainty for which science strives, is unattainable. We can, if we choose, examine shrouds, seek out collaborating written records, follow archaeological digs that seek to identify Jesus’ tomb, but such fragmentary evidence cannot establish “Truth”. Like the women at Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning, we will believe because we have found an empty space. This empty space, this darkness of uncertainty, is the same that the great saints and mystics across the ages have encountered and joyfully entered in faith and in the hope of the arrival of the ultimate Light. In the meantime, we might usefully keep in mind Stuart Chase’s words that “for the believer no proof is necessary, and for the non-believer no proof is possible”.¹ And, perhaps, we might also agree with the Venerable Bede’s final words of his History:

I pray you, noble Jesus, that as You have graciously granted me joyfully to imbibe the words of Your knowledge, so You will also of Your bounty grant me to come at length to Yourself, the fount of all wisdom, and to dwell in Your presence for ever.

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¹ Stuart Chase, b. 1888. American writer and economist.