

The Experience of Thomas
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As we encounter the Risen Christ again this week with the help of the Disciple Thomas, we'll explore how it is that we come to religious beliefs in the first place. This is one of the central themes of our Gospel story today—how Thomas comes to a religious understanding of who Jesus truly is for him. This understanding then helps Thomas to eventually go out into the world and spread the Good News. So how exactly does Thomas come to religious belief?

Religion helps us answer questions of ultimate concern: who am I?, why am I here?, where am I going?, is there a greater purpose?, where do I come from?, how do I make meaning in my life?[1] Religion helps us answer these questions and guides our lives, teaching us how we should relate to humanity and creation and God. Moreover, human beings live by stories and narratives—this is part of how we make meaning. Religion grounds us in sacred stories that help shape our beliefs and teach us how to be part of our beautiful but complicated world. In Christianity, not only do we have sacred stories about Jesus, we have sacred stories that Jesus tells. And Jesus often told stories in response to questions people posed—sometimes to challenge him and other times because people truly wanted to know what he thought and how he saw reality.

In some respects, all religions are responses to these deeply human questions of ultimate concern. When you start getting specific, our answers and the sacred stories we tell have some commonalities but also differences that make each religion unique and special. For our purposes in Christianity, there is one way that I've always appreciated that helps us figure out how we as individuals and whole Christian denominations can answer these questions of ultimate concern. It's the Wesleyan Quadrilateral which is much more interesting and less complicated than it may sound at the outset.

John Wesley, who founded the Methodist Movement, built on Anglican theological understandings and formulated a model for how we understand our Christian faith. Having a model to understand the ways we know what we know in Christianity helps us begin to answer those deeply human questions of ultimate concern. His methods got simplified and codified by Albert Outler, but Wesley spoke about four areas we Christians can use to progress in our faith—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

Scripture is pretty self-explanatory—we understand Christianity through our sacred text which tells our sacred stories. For Protestants, scripture is considered the primary source of our faith and the Bible offers us insight and instruction for the Christian life. How do we figure out who we are, where we came from, why we're here—let's turn to the Bible, of course! Tradition is the development and growth of our religion through thousands of years of Church history. We have the Christian tradition as a whole and individual denominations' traditions. So if we want to develop our faiths, let's look to our forbearers and trust the foundation that our brothers and sisters who came before us built.

Experience is our individual understandings—holy moments, Thin Place moments—times when we connect to God individually and communally. Having religious experiences helps shape and nurture our Christian faith. Finally, reason is thinking things through and coming to deeper understandings. Using our God-given brains helps us to discern, weigh out, explore, think, and interpret our lives as Christians. Wesley once said that reason cannot bring people to faith, but it can shorten the leap.[2] So if you take all of these areas together—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—then you come to a mature understanding of the Christian

faith. We as individuals and as part of a faith community can begin to figure out who are we?, is there a greater purpose?, and how do we make meaning in our lives? How can we answer these questions of ultimate concern in Christianity—by using: scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

But wait a second. Here's the issue—Christian denominations and individuals rarely, if ever, present a holistic view and give credence to all of these ways of knowing. In general, Catholics prioritize tradition and Protestants prioritize scripture. We can get even more specific, an Evangelical Christian likely prioritizes scripture and experience whereas a Progressive Christian likely prioritizes scripture and reason—or just reason!

Let's test this out today at Pilgrim. Remember the four ways of knowing and deepening our faiths—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. So if I were to ask you to explain your beliefs to me and how you're living out your faith today, what would be the primary way of knowing you would choose? I'm going to make you choose. How many of you would say scripture? You wrestle with your beliefs and live out your faith by turning to scripture first. What about tradition? You're a New England Congregationalist through and through—and let's look to our forebears throughout Church History to make meaning today. Experience? You understand God and how you should be in the world because of how you experience God in holy moments both individually and communally. And reason? You understand these questions of ultimate concern by using your God-given brain to explore, think, and interpret our Christian faith.

Great! So the Wesley Quadrilateral is not the be all/end all of figuring out how we understand our Christian faiths communally and individually. However, it's helpful to realize that we bring a whole lot to the table and have some resources to draw upon when we try to answer questions of ultimate concern as Christians. It's also important to know that we all have our go-to ways of understanding religion—the ways that feel most comfortable for us. But it's good to expand our minds and our hearts and our religious practices to be more holistic in our approach if we truly want to deepen our Christian faith as individuals and as a church community.

Which leads me back to Thomas and his doubts and his affirmation of faith at the end of the story: “My Lord and my God!”^[3] For Thomas, tradition wasn't enough. He had all his buddies saying that they had seen Christ in their midst—but the word of the community alone, the word of those who saw the miracle without him just didn't hit the mark quite yet. Thomas could have turned to scripture—but the Gospels weren't written down yet, obviously. Though he could have considered the teachings of Jesus who said that he would die and rise again a few times during his ministry. But that doesn't seem to be what Thomas needs for his own religious understanding either. Thomas seems to prioritize reason and experience.

As Clayton Schmit reminds us, “The human mind searches for order: to make sense of things, to understand the world, to organize all the data that comes to our awareness . . . [yet] faith is a mystery of the heart that the mind wants to solve.”^[4] So we can imagine that when Thomas encounters his fellow disciples and they're going on and on about seeing Jesus, that his head began to spin because their testimony isn't enough when Jesus' Resurrection makes no logical sense because this is just not how the world usually works. His human mind, which naturally seeks order, cannot compute the Resurrection—a mystery of the heart. Whether we affirm a bodily resurrection or a spiritual resurrection, the sacred story that Christianity tells is that Jesus rose from the grave, that death was not the end of his story and therefore will not be the end of our stories—because love wins.

What Thomas ends up needing the most to affirm his faith is an experience of the Risen Christ. And this is exactly what he gets. Jesus says to him in this sacred story, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”^[5]

What's notable is that Jesus doesn't express impatience with Thomas—he doesn't tell Thomas that he shouldn't be having to prove his Resurrection in the first place because Thomas should have just taken to heart the words of his brothers and sisters or Jesus' own teachings about Resurrection anyway.

Basically, Jesus says if you want more than a second-hand encounter with me—touch me, see me, believe in me, I'm here. And we don't even know if Thomas actually did touch Jesus—the text never says. All we know is that Jesus offers this incredibly personal religious experience of the Resurrection and love winning in God's story and our stories to Thomas. And Thomas responds with an affirmation of faith unlike anything we have heard thus far in the Gospels. Thomas calls Jesus God, one of the strongest declarations of faith in the entire New Testament.[6]

The tradition teaches us that Thomas goes on to spread the Good News and made it all the way to India. Thomas is the patron saint of India and of architects actually—since he supposedly built seven churches during his time there—with his bare hands! But out of his doubt and his religious experience, which must have helped him come to deeper faith and understanding, we see him teaching these sacred stories he learned from Jesus far away from home in his later years.

In the end, stories like Thomas' encounter with the Risen Christ help shape and grow our Christian faiths today. We use these sacred stories found in scripture, we use the tradition of thousands of years of Christian history, we use our experiences of the holy in our midst, and we use our God-given reason and intellectual insights to figure out who we are and to whom we belong. We use stories like Thomas' encounter with the Risen Christ to make meaning in our lives and to help God mend the world. May it be so with us, Amen.

[1] Dr. Jeffrey Pugh, Introduction to Religious Studies Class Notes, Elon University, Fall 2004

[2] Alan K. Waltz, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral" in A Dictionary for United Methodists, <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=258&GID=312&GMOD=VWD>

[3] John 20:28, NRSV.

[4] Clayton J. Schmit, Homiletical Perspective of John 20:19-31 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, 395.

[5] John 20:27, NRSV.

[6] Martin B. Copenhaver, Pastoral Perspective of John 20:19-31 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide, 396.