

Thomas' Story  
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"Thomas' Story" Pilgrim Church UCC, April 3, 2016, (John 20:19-31) Second Sunday of Easter

As we encounter the Risen Christ again this Sunday with the help of the disciple Thomas, let's explore how we come to religious beliefs. This is one of the central themes of our Gospel story—how Thomas comes to a religious understanding of who Jesus truly is for him after the events of Easter. Now I've shared much of this message before, but it's worth repeating! Religion helps us answer questions of ultimate concern: who am I?, why am I here?, where am I going?, is there a greater purpose?, how do I make meaning in my life?[1] Religion guides our lives, teaching us how we should relate to humanity, creation, and God. People live by stories—this is how we make meaning. In Christianity, we have sacred stories about Jesus and we have sacred stories that Jesus taught us.

In some respects, all World Religions are responses to questions of ultimate concern. The sacred stories we tell have some commonalities but also real differences that make religions unique and special. For our purposes this morning, there's a helpful Christian methodology for theological reflection that helps us figure out how we can answer questions of ultimate concern from our perspective: the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. John Wesley, who founded the Methodist Movement, had this method for how people understand the Christian faith specifically. Wesley spoke about four areas that help us on our way—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

Scripture is pretty self-explanatory—we understand Christianity through our sacred texts that contain 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—religious or mystical experiences, Thin Places—times when we profoundly connected to God. Having religious experiences helps shape and nurture our Christian faith in light of our own lives. Finally, reason is thinking things through and coming to mature 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 an incredibly grounded, mature, balanced understanding of the Christian faith. We as individuals and as a faith community can be well on our way to figuring out who are we, what's the greater purpose, and how we make meaning in our lives.

But wait a second. Here's the issue—Christian denominations and individuals rarely, if ever, have a truly holistic view and give credence to all of these ways of knowing. In general, Roman Catholics prioritize tradition and Protestants prioritize scripture. Though denominational expressions of Christianity let alone individuals within those denominational expressions of Christianity only get more nuanced from there.

Let's test this out. Remember the four ways of knowing and deepening our faiths—scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. If I were to ask you to explain your beliefs and how you're

living out your faith, what would be the primary way you would 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 member of the United Church of Christ/a New England Congregationalist through and through—and let's first 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, experience is most important. And reason? You understand these questions of ultimate concern by using your God-given brain to explore, think, and interpret your Christian faith.

Great! So the Wesleyan 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 as individuals within a community bring a whole lot to the table and have resources to draw upon when we try to answer questions of ultimate concern as Christians. It's important to know that we all have our go-to ways of understanding our faiths—ways that feel most comfortable and natural for us. And if we take all four elements together, the individual Christian will have a mature and fulfilling understanding of our religion which leads to the faithful responses of worship and service.

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!"<sup>[3]</sup> For Thomas, tradition wasn't really enough. He had all his buddies saying that they had seen Christ in their midst—but the word of the community alone just didn't hit the mark quite yet. Thomas could have turned to scripture—but the Gospels weren't written down yet. 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 Seminary Professor 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."<sup>[4]</sup> So when Thomas is with his fellow disciples and they're going on and on about seeing Jesus, his head probably began to spin because their testimony isn't enough when Jesus' resurrection makes no logical sense. His mind seeking 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 lives, that Good Friday wasn't the end of the story and therefore death won't be the end of our stories—because love ultimately wins and new life comes.

What Thomas ends up needing 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 from John's Gospel, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."<sup>[5]</sup> 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.

Basically Jesus says if you want more than a second-hand encounter with me—touch me, see me, trust in me, I'm here for you. We don't even know if Thomas actually did touch Jesus—our sacred story never says. All we know is that Thomas has this incredible personal religious experience of the resurrection. 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.

In the end, Gospel stories like Thomas' encounter with the Risen Christ help grow our Christian faiths. We use these sacred stories found in scripture, we use the tradition of two thousand years of Christianity, we use our experiences of the holy in our midst, and we use our God-given reason and intellectual insights to discover 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 go out from this place, helping 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.