

“The bible tells us how to get to heaven, not how the heavens go.” This is a quote from the famous scientist Galileo Galilei, the one who tried to show how the earth revolves around the sun – how our universe is *heliocentric*. Unfortunately, Galileo was forced to recant his scientific beliefs by the church and placed under house arrest, having to promise never to promote heliocentrism again. Despite his conflicts with the church Galileo remained a faithful Roman Catholic until his death.

This quote from Galileo resurfaces in the writings of Sir Isaac Newton, the famous mathematician who, amongst other major scientific discoveries, gave gravity a mathematical equation. You also may know him as the guy who got hit on the head with an apple. What is surprising is that though Isaac Newton is buried at Westminster Abbey, a center for the church of England, we do not often think of these early scientists as being very religious.

Isaac Newton was deeply religious and also quite suspicious of how the world worked. This suspicion caused him to pour over any writings he could get his hands on, both theological and scientific. He studied Jewish law, the great philosophers, chemistry, writings of the early Christian fathers, and mathematics as a way to try and make sense of the world around him. Through his studies he became interested in things he could not see, such as light and gravity, and he went on to write considerably about these subjects.

Isaac Newton found God and experienced his glory in the world around him, not only in the physical nature that he could see, but the unseen matters of science that for so long baffled scholars and caused many believers to fear how progressive science might affect the traditional beliefs of Christianity.

Through his honest questions, worldly suspicion, curiosity, and a little skepticism, Isaac Newton used his love of the sciences and his faith in God to encourage others to think deeply about the world we live in. His desire to reach out and experience the divine, to ask questions about the seen and unseen, strengthened his faith and relationship with God.

I am sure many of us are familiar with the phrase “being a doubting Thomas”. Perhaps we have encountered a doubting Thomas, or maybe we have even been one ourselves. But not only is Thomas doubting in the account of Christ’s resurrection, he has been left out of a wonder filled experience of the divine. After the pain and sorrow of seeing his Lord and friend crucified on the cross, it is no wonder he may have spent some time alone after Christ’s death. While the other ten disciples were hiding together in a locked room, perhaps Thomas was hiding on his own, grieving, wondering what he might do next. He has given up all that he has, to follow his Rabbi, leaving behind loved ones, job prospects, maybe even a woman he intended to marry. Maybe Thomas was reconnecting with old family and friends, making sure to tell them how much they meant to him, something he probably did not have the chance to say to Jesus. Whatever Thomas was doing, we know he missed the first appearance of Jesus to his disciples.

Thomas is still in a time of mourning when his friends rush into his house yelling “he’s alive, Thomas he’s alive! If only you could have been there!” The remaining ten disciples are talking over each other, tripping over their words in their excitement as they describe how Jesus stood among them in that locked room; that he had been raised from the dead.

Thomas is not just doubting what his friends are explaining to him, he is hurt that he has been left out of this momentous occasion. If Jesus had appeared to the others in a locked room having been raised from the dead, surely, he could have taken a moment to also appear to Thomas?

Thomas's mind is brimming with these questions, doubts and maybe even some anger and hurt. Seeing the excitement and joy on his friends' faces singles him out and leaves him distressed and confused.

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” Thomas's request seems reasonable enough, after all the disciples were struggling with their doubts and just as unbelieving before Jesus had appeared to them! Why shouldn't Thomas expect the same experience from his Lord?

There is a big gap between stubborn skepticism and honest questioning, and the followers of Christ fall everywhere in between after his resurrection. At the beginning we read of Mary believing when she hears her Lord say her name. The disciples are cowering in their unbelief and fear until their surprise visit from Jesus. And in this passage, Thomas, longing for a tangible reason to believe. Thomas is looking for a new experience with the divine, a story that he can rush to tell his friends about in the same excitement that they had when they told him their testimonies. He is longing for an experience that renews and revitalizes his faith in Christ.

If you have ever been to a Christian summer camp, or retreat, you may be familiar with the practice of “testimony nights”. Most often towards the end of the camp or retreat, these nights are designed to create a safe space where people can share their stories of coming to Christ. The atmosphere of these nights creates the sense of comfort that allows the participants to share their lowest lows, when Christ took them out of their sadness and hurt and offered them a new life of light in his divine love and grace.

These testimony nights can be extremely valuable and moving when done in a safe and supportive manner, but what happens if you do not have a dramatic testimony? What if you think your story is boring or maybe just average?

As I was growing up and attending these testimony nights, they always felt a little awkward for me. Going around the circle of campers or retreat attendees we would get to my turn and I would look at my friends around the room who were ready to support me in my vulnerability, and I would launch into my story of coming to Christ. I grew up in a Christian home, went to church on Sundays and youth programs during the week, did my devotions, attended a Christian school, and accepted Jesus into my heart one night during my personal prayers. What reason did I have to not believe?

Overall, I considered my testimony pretty boring compared to the other testimonies given throughout the night. What did this mean for my relationship with God? Was I not a real Christian because I did not have a miraculous conversion moment? Was I not Christian enough because I did not feel a struggle over my soul in the way some of my peers described in their testimonies of coming to Christ?

This idea of divine experiences can be a struggle among Christians. How can we honour and believe one person's divine experience if we have not had one ourselves? Or how can we explain the joy and wonder of our personal encounters with God when many cannot fathom what

we have felt and experienced? Like Thomas we may wonder why Jesus has not shown himself to us personally. We may not expect a physical encounter while we are sitting in our homes, but many of us are longing to reach out and experience the divine presence of Christ.

Beyond our personal longing, we might look at the miracles recorded in the Bible and wonder why we do not see Jesus feeding thousands and raising the dead in our world today. All around us in our homes, our communities, and beyond, we see those who are broken and hurting, filled with the need for divine healing and the guiding hand of God. If Jesus can do all these wonderful things that we have read about, why will not he show himself in the same way today?

Thomas has been struggling with his doubts and questions for a whole week following Jesus' first appearance to the ten disciples. He has been putting up with their remarks on Jesus' resurrected form, comments on the wonder of his appearance, of finding them hidden in a locked room, and Thomas can no longer stand their constant nagging telling him to just believe what they saw. Despite their testimonies Thomas still has doubts. But maybe during the week he has been sticking just a little closer to his friends, perhaps attending their family meals and sitting with them as they discuss what the resurrection of Christ means for all who have been following Jesus over the past few years. Maybe Thomas is hoping Jesus will appear to the disciples again and this time he will not be the one who misses out.

He is longing for the experience of seeing Jesus' resurrected body and he so desperately wants to believe what the other disciples are saying despite the fact that he spoke aloud the confusion and doubts that the others had most likely held just days before they had their own divine experience.

It is in the familiar setting of locked doors and hidden conversation when Jesus once again appears to his disciples and this time Thomas was ready. This time Thomas was right there along-side the others so that he too could experience the glory of Christ's resurrected body. And it is like nothing he could have ever imagined. The hurt and confusion fades away as Thomas sees his risen Lord for the first time. Jesus has gifted Thomas with the same experience as the other ten, filled with the sense of wonder, power, and joy. Jesus invites Thomas to him saying "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Instead of needing to investigate further, or to ask more questions concerning his doubt, Thomas exclaims: "My Lord and my God!" In this statement not only does Thomas acknowledge Jesus as his risen Saviour, but now he sees Jesus as being one with God.

In this interaction Jesus addresses Thomas's doubts by giving him the opportunity to experience tangibly the truth of his resurrection. Thomas's newfound faith in Jesus as his Lord and God sets an example in the book of John for all believers that come after him. Though Thomas needed the physical presence of Jesus to renew his faith, this account taken by John with all the other miracles, signs, and interactions that are written down are meant to convey the truth of the Gospel to future believers so that they might believe even without the tangible proof that Thomas so desired.

We do not often like to talk about our doubts or any falters we may have had in our faith. We do not want to be labeled a "doubting Thomas". We are worried what those around us might think if we are not perfect and polished without any doubts or questions or suspicion as we look

around at the world that we live in. After our testimonies of conversion and accepting Jesus into our hearts we often hope for an easy road ahead of believing, we rely on our remembering of the moments when we have experienced the glory and grace of Jesus, no matter how small or passing those wonder filled moments may have been. Yet in the account of the disciple Thomas, we meet a man who walked and talked with the Lord, saw firsthand the miraculous signs that brought so many to believe, and still Thomas doubted the resurrection. He doubted until the moment Jesus invited him to touch his wounds and truly feel that Christ had indeed been raised from the dead.

So how are we called to believe without the wonder of the word made flesh? What is Jesus offering us today to reach out and touch, to experience the divine? If you are in a time of doubt, what is Jesus showing you so that you may proclaim that he is your Lord and your God?

Maybe Jesus is shown to you in the signs and symbols of the sacraments. The tangible action of taking bread and juice, remembering Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Perhaps you see Jesus in the cool water dripping down the forehead of a crying baby as they are drawn into the covenant of God's people. These sacraments are given to us as a physical reminder of the love and grace that we experience without cost. Our present-day way of reaching out and experiencing the divine resurrection for ourselves. Maybe Jesus is shown to you in the quiet morning, watching the world come alive to begin a new day. The way that nature works in a way so divinely designed beyond the understanding of the most brilliant scientists and scholars. A physical nature so perfect that the study of it has drawn so many into closer relationship with their creator. Perhaps Jesus is shown to you in words from scripture, giving the account of his works and his mission while he walked the earth in the form of a man.

In his writings, John reminds us how we are given these accounts in scripture so that we might believe. Not only is he writing to take a historical account of what he has witnessed, he writes to us today, to address our doubts and questions, to assure us of the truth of scripture and the message of the Gospel, to share the love and grace of Christ to all who read it. No matter if we have seen angels or felt God's hand on us or if our testimonies do not seem all that miraculous. We are given the gospel so that we might believe that Jesus is Messiah, the Son of God, and that we are given new life in his name.