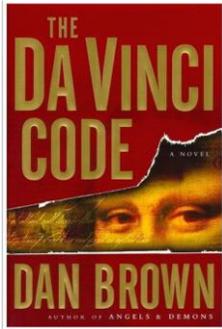


# “Varieties of Unbelief”

April 23, 2017  
John 20: 19-31 NRSV

Rev. Dr. Alan Bennett  
Wall Street United Church



I want to take you back 14 years to 2003. That was the year that a book called 'The Da Vinci Code' first came out. It was written by Dan Brown. ➡

Tom Hanks starred in the movie version. I actually watched it on TV a couple of months ago – a great movie.



But let me go back to when it first came out. A week after Easter in 2003 I received an anonymous letter—no name, no signature. I had a hunch who sent it, but I couldn't be sure. If I'm right, the individual has since died and gone to his reward. I really do not like anonymous letters. They are always critical and they don't allow any way to respond.

This one was true to form. It read, “Why are you still preaching nonsense? Don't you know that Dan Brown has torn the guts out of the Christian Faith?” Well, a couple of things were clear. First, the anonymous writer was present that Easter Sunday and did not like my sermon. Second, he had read the Da Vinci Code and took it seriously. The only thing I knew about the Da Vinci Code was that it was rather controversial. I hadn't read it, but my anonymous letter changed that. I went out and bought a copy of it and read it that week.

Every once in a while something emerges in pop culture that cannot be ignored. The Da Vinci Code was one. Dan Brown, when interviewed on the talk shows, would say that his book was a novel – a work of fiction – but on the other hand, in interview after interview, he would say that his book was based on detailed historical facts. Huge numbers of people believed that the Da Vinci Code was historically accurate. I suspect that many still do.

According to the Da Vinci Code, the Easter story is a hoax – an elaborate fraud. What is worse; at the highest level, church officials know it's all a hoax. In all Dan Brown's books, the Vatican and the Christian Church are one and the same. The Vatican (he claims) has perpetrated an elaborate, deadly conspiracy to keep ordinary people from knowing the truth.

What can I say about it? I spent eleven years in University, much of it studying Church history, and I believe that truth matters. Fake news and

fake history do not impress me. Truth is important. Christianity began from events that actually occurred in time and place and in history. In other words, *there really was a Jesus of Nazareth who lived and died*. No serious historian doubts this for a moment. Likewise, Jesus' followers were actual, real people who lived and breathed and either reported faithfully on the events that happened or they made them up. There is very little middle ground here. Further, the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the events that followed that led to the beginning of the Christian Church are all available for all to examine, and have been exhaustively studied.

By contrast, the Da Vinci Code is what is called a 'conspiracy' book. Conspiracy theories of all kinds are incredibly common. There are so many. Some are truly deadly. One of the very worst is a book called the Protocols of Zion.

It is an insidious little book that first saw the light of day in Russia in 1903. It purports to be the minutes of a top-secret, enormously wealthy, immensely powerful, group of Jews who are secretly running the world. The book was widely circulated in the 1920's and 1930's. The Nazis loved it. Extreme right wing groups are still circulating it on the Internet. It is a vicious, horrible, anti-Semitic work of fiction – sadly believed by far too many.

It was just a few years ago that I was shown another similar kind of book that purported to prove that gays were secretly running the United Nations and were about to take over America and force everyone to be gay. A member of our Church, who actually believed it, showed it to me. It would be have been funny if it wasn't so ugly.

Conspiracies always focus suspicion and hate on a particular group or institution. South of the border there are a ton of conspiracies that are anti-government – just hate the government – especially when Barak Obama was the President. The terrible thing is that so many people seem to believe them. Donald Trump is the President today in large measure because of the vicious conspiracy lies about Hillary Clinton that flooded the Internet.

Dan Brown focused this kind of intense suspicion and dislike on Christianity in general, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular. His take on Church history is absolutely untrue and misleading. But as Dan Brown was well aware, most of his readers would not know that.

But now I want to go farther back with you – 2000 years farther back – to Jerusalem, in the week following Jesus' death. You see, contrary to Dan Brown's take on things at the time, the truth is not everyone believed that Jesus had risen and was alive. Our age has no monopoly on

skepticism. Thomas, one of the inner circle who simply didn't believe it. The only proof that he would accept was to see Jesus with his own eyes and touch the nail holes in his hands and side.

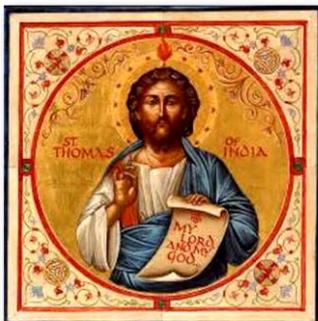
The truth about Thomas is that we actually don't know his name! The word "Thomas" in Hebrew means 'a twin'. In the old King James Version of the Bible he is sometimes called Didymus. Didymus is Greek for a twin.

In the gospel of John, Thomas is mentioned three times. The first is when Jesus learns that Lazarus is ill and says that he must go to him. The problem was that Lazarus lived just outside of Jerusalem, which was a very dangerous place for them at that point. The rest of the disciples were so appalled at the idea of going to Jerusalem they almost refused. It was Thomas who rallied them by saying, "Let us go with him and die with him if we have to." That demonstrates two things: a strong sense of loyalty, and considerable respect from the other disciples.

The second glimpse that we get into the character of Thomas occurs in the upper room. Jesus at one point says to his disciples, "and you know the way where I am going." Now the disciples were upset and worried and stressed, and they were not at all certain what Jesus was talking about or where he was going. But the only one who had the courage to ask was Thomas. Roughly translated, what he said was, "Lord, we don't have a hot clue where you are going. How can we know the way?" To which Jesus gave his now very famous reply, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

The third time Thomas appears is in the resurrection story we heard this morning. When the others told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, he was a skeptic. Clearly he had a questioning mind combined with integrity. He wasn't the kind of person to run with a crowd. But skeptic or not, one thing is absolutely clear. Something did totally change Thomas' mind and convinced him that Jesus was still alive. I say this because Thomas became one of the greatest of apostles of the early Christian church.

That may surprise you. Here in the west we hear very little about him. To us he is just "Doubting Thomas". But if he is unknown in the west, he is very well known in the east. The Mar Thomas Syrian Church of Kerala in South India was founded by Thomas.



The evidence is very persuasive that he went eastward carrying the gospel into Persia, and eventually reached the shores of India.

Years ago I served as a missionary in Zambia. While there I met a number of Christians from South India who were members of the Mar Thomas Church. They were at pains to emphasize that their

historic church was not the product of western missionaries: St. Thomas himself was their founder. And recent archeological evidence has confirmed it. We now know for sure that the Christian Church was in India before the 2nd century, which means that Christianity was in India long before it reached Western Europe. Thomas the twin – the guy who said, “I just don’t believe it” – was the one responsible for the gospel being spread so widely in the Far East.

The issue that I want to briefly look at this morning is that of truth and doubt. How many times have you said of something, “Maybe, but I doubt it!” We’ve all said that many times about many things. It is no different when it comes to faith in God and in Christ. A lot of people doubt it. I am sure there are various kinds of doubters here in this Church. We live in a very secular, scientific world, where more people doubt than believe. A lot of people find things in the Bible, like the miracle stories, unbelievable. The resurrection itself is a stumbling block to many. They just can’t believe it.

Another type of doubt arises out of the pain and hurt of life. Just recently I talked with a man whose father-in-law had died of ALS. He said to me “After watching him die like that, I can never believe in God.” I did not argue with him. It would have done no good. I just listened and tried to be caring and understanding.

One thing I have learned over the years when it comes to faith is that we all have our own areas of struggle – our own individual reasons for wonder. When I was young I majored in philosophy at university and I became an atheist. I liked the ethics and the morality of Christianity but could not believe in any objective reality to the stories about God or Jesus.

What turned me around? – a number of wonderful people. It is a long story and sometime I may tell you more. The bottom line is that I came to realize that there is very little certainty about anything in this life. Young people always want things to be right or wrong, yes or no. I slowly learned that in this life nothing comes in such easy categories. We all have to live with ambiguities and uncertainties. Living in faith means that we do not have all the answers. Further, and this is important – it is possible to understand something with your heart, without certainty in your head. If you’ve ever fallen head over heels in love, you know what I mean. That is what love is about, and that is what faith is about. It is knowledge of the heart much more than the head, and it is exactly what this world so desperately needs.

I want to leave you with a couple of thoughts. First, doubt is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is fear. Fear does far more harm than doubt. It is fear that destroys and tears down. It is fear that causes

people to do terrible things, and vote for stupid people -- not doubt. So don't ever worry about your doubts. Just keep thinking, reading and talking about it because there is far more to this life than any one of us will ever learn or know. And remember too that people with far greater minds than any of us here will ever possess have been people of deep faith.

The second and most important thing I want you to ponder is this – what changed Thomas from a skeptic to a believer was an experience. It was meeting the living Christ. Jesus said to him "*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*" Thomas said to him, *My Lord and my God!* Then Jesus told him, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.*"

And this still happens. It is meeting, knowing, and experiencing the love of Christ that builds faith. A faith that is just in your head will not stay for long anyway. Faith that transforms – faith that changes lives, lives in the heart.

The Spirit of the Living Christ is an energy source of love. That power, this energy of love, can touch your very soul and make you come alive. It is hard to explain, but I know that it is real and powerful and wonderful.

As we walk through this life we all choose what we will believe and what we will not believe. The longer I live the more I am glad that, like Thomas, I have placed my faith in the man from Nazareth. No one who has done that has ever regretted it. Amen.