

Muriel Lipp: Doubting Thomas and Believing John

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Muriel Lipp

Doubting Thomas and Believing John

When I first looked at the scriptures for this week, I knew it would be difficult to make sense of the reading from Revelation. I often have trouble with Revelation. Moreover, in the John scripture about Thomas the doubter, I so often identify with Thomas, whom Jesus admonishes – I figured this might be hard for me. Well, it was. However, so often when a set of scriptures squirms like an eel, it is a sign there is something in it for you, as many of you have said before.

First, let us consider Thomas. He did not believe in Jesus' Resurrection until he was given concrete proof. Then he believed. For us it is impossible to have concrete proof. The body is long gone. Perhaps Jesus was referring to us who followed when He said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

This is not to say that some of us do not have trouble with the physical details of the Resurrection. I recently read *A Long Way from Tipperary*, by John Dominic Crossan. Here is a man who has trouble with conventional biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, he makes the Resurrection larger for me by suggesting that Jesus was made alive in a deeper, fuller way than the physical, as Marjory suggested in her sermon last week. Perhaps the presence those first Disciples felt was a

larger-than-life presence that gave them a power they never had before. Certainly, we see they are reenergized by whatever happened at the tomb Easter morning, and thereafter. Moreover, we often feel that energy too at certain times in our church: energy that has a source beyond us. We call it God, Christ or the Holy.

To begin with, did you notice in Revelation those two definitions of God? “Grace to you and peace from God, who is and who was and is to come.” That reminds us of Moses, when God tells Moses God’s name is I Am. We could not come up with a more inclusive definition. Then in Verse 8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says God, (and again) “who is and who was and is to come.” There is no specific identification – not male, female, old, young, black, white, or anything we can pin down. Just this large, mysterious, yet strangely intimate, Someone. Notice the verbs—all parts of the infinitive to be. If God is any part of speech, God is a verb, representing both existence and action. Forgive me for trying to pin God down even that much, but I find it irresistible. The old classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, says God may be loved but not thought of.

Revelation was probably written while John was in exile on the isle of Patmos at the time the tiny new Christian churches in Asia Minor were suffering persecution by Rome. Its language often is dreamlike, visionary. Sometimes it is earthy, and sometimes symbolic. I would be wary of anyone who tells me: This is exactly what this or that in Revelation means. Rather, I think we should place ourselves beside John on that island and listen to him, feel with him.

What must it have been like to see your Christian friends dying because of their faith? How John escaped death, or *if* he did, we do not know. The Romans were beheading Christians right and left because they would not give up their faith; instead John was exiled. Many Christians renounced their faith. Others allowed themselves to be killed. Many believe John wrote Revelation to make martyrdom attractive, and

strangely enough, it seemed to energize those small struggling churches. Some went underground and grew strong.

Most of the early Christians were Jews, but they soon began to realize they were no longer Jews in a religious sense. This created problems in their families. In addition, their Jewish neighbors thought they were a bit demented, following this Jesus who was dead – and yet was *not* dead. The worst, of course, was the persecution by Rome. In the Book of Revelation, eternity is the playing field – eternity both here and after death.

In our John scripture the risen Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Is this a foreshadowing of what was to come—when those who confessed their faith would be tortured and killed? Most of the martyrs had not seen, and yet they believed. Blessed are those. We owe these forebears so much for giving us our faith at the cost, for many of them, of their lives. Could I do this? Could you do this?

Here we are, almost 2,000 years later, and the only things we have to fear – we Seekers who are descendants of Thomas the doubter, John the faithful and others – are:

- Can we afford our new church building?
- Will the move ever take place?
- Will our community survive intact?
- Will we grow, inward and outward?
- Will we have enough children for our Sunday school?

This is not much to worry about when you compare it with torture and death. In addition, as Jesus said in John 20: “Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” John the Baptist introduced the Jewish community to Jesus, and Jesus, after His death, introduced those first Christians to the Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit is Jesus’ breath among us. It is characterized by joy, energy. When we are together, and we feel it, we need to name it. Some of us end our e-mails with

Peace, others Shalom, another word for peace. Some remind us to keep praying this is the twenty-first century, and we have computers. Still, we use the old words.

Not long ago, I had this dream:

I am looking for something. I have wandered into a cave. I notice there is a deep hole, and I might fall into it. Suddenly there are other people familiar to me (Seekers?), all hunting their way. I follow them. They by-pass the hole and find steps down to a common seating area, like an amphitheater. We sit together, waiting, as for a teaching. I see a green gecko on the wall, spiders. I think these things cannot hurt me.

This dream, I think, was about our move. There is a feeling of danger, ameliorated by the presence of community. We are wandering into a strange, new life. Before us is a chasm that we could fall into. We are waiting for a teaching.

Dreams, even nightmares, are our friends. They tell us more about what we think and feel than we would otherwise know. Some of us are and have been in dream groups. It is good to mine this inner ore. Whether John on the isle of Patmos used dreams in the book of Revelation, we do not know, but we can tell he is an inward-oriented person. Dreams and visions might have been his way of finding truth.

So many Christians over these two millennia have suffered from taking dreams and visions seriously. It is hard to believe that the descendants of the martyrs were themselves torturing and killing people for their beliefs. During the Inquisition, the hierarchical Church was so rigid that you could be called to account for obeying your inner voice or your answers to prayer if these were in conflict with the Church's interpretation. God's voice, it was said, needed an ecclesiastical decoder. Joan of Arc was a fine example. She would not recant the acts her inner voices commanded her to

do, and so was burned at the stake. Recently, she was canonized.

We Protestants do not get off the hook either. German Reformed and Lutheran churches also persecuted Christians—Mennonites and other Anabaptists – who did not think as they did. Happily, many of them came to this country, and worship freely here. Then there was the Holocaust. We are only beginning to learn how many Christians participated in that. Moreover, in our country, so-called Christians persecute, in many ways, those who are different. It was not just the Romans, as in the Book of Revelation, long ago and far away.

We Seekers who are working on a statement of belonging are well aware of the seriousness of our task. We want it to cover everyone, to allow each person's beliefs to be valued. Yet we also want this statement to say how we think Jesus meant his church, this Seekers church, to be. We are having trouble with language. Language can be a limiting vehicle. However, no one is going to be tortured or killed here.

Prayer has been my favorite channel to God, and the silent retreat my favorite discipline. That word *discipline* ... I know it is an unpleasant word to some, yet I embrace these commitments with joy. However, I have had my difficulties with prayer, particularly when our children were small. I tried to pray each day at 6:30 or 7:00. That was supposed to be before the children got up. Nevertheless, they got up any old time, and when one heard the sounds of another – soon they were all four up. Then it would be diapers, breakfast, and all sorts of things. If I told them to be quiet – I was praying – it made little difference, especially to the smallest ones. Therefore, I took my problem to Gordon, as we all did in those early days. We did not have spiritual guides, mission groups or weekly reports. He said, well, set your time, and whatever goes on in that time is prayer, and at the end of the time, it is "amen," and you have prayed. It is amazing how that satisfied me. I do not know if it satisfied God. I think of

parents of little children, and how hard it is for them to get quiet time. Now I do have time – but it is still hard sometimes, especially when you are traveling, to set time to be alone with God. Most often now, I pray while walking by the river, which is near where I live. Somehow, the walking and breathing go together to make me centered, and it is my favorite way to pray, refreshing body and soul.

Sean Caulfield, who wrote *The Experience of Praying*, said, “We must discover the way of praying that suits ourselves, celebrating its purifying aspects without self-pity and its joys without egotism...Prayer is not the abandonment of one’s personhood, but the discovery of one’s essential freedom.”

Do you ever, in the middle of your day ask, “Where are you, God, right now, with me?” I have often done that, quite apart from a time of prayer, and sometimes I see strange things unnoticed before. There is so much more of God to see and hear than we choose to see and hear. We forget the One Who Is, Who Was and Is To Be.

I will close with a quote from *The Divine Milieu*, by Teilhard de Chardin – a book that has been very popular here at the C of S:

“As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world, which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it.”