I BELIEVE

The Christian's Creed

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Fortress Press  Philadelphia

1968
**I Believe: The Christian's Creed**

Perhaps God will demand my soul tonight. Who knows? Therefore everything depends on my entrusting that soul to his hands today. For his hands can calm the waves, rend the tomb, heal our wounds, and forgive our sins. Then the cemeteries will really become what they once were for a deep-delving mind: "God's acres," where we lie dormant, as kernels of that eternal seed which (as Klopstock once said) God has sown to ripen for the day of harvest. Then we can speak the paradoxical and superbly triumphant Easter confession of Kohlbruegge: "Therefore, when I die (but I shall no longer die) and someone finds my skull, that skull will yet preach to him like this:

I have no eyes,
and yet I see him;
I have no brain nor understanding,
and yet I comprehend him;
I have no lips,
and yet I kiss him;
I have no tongue,
and yet I praise him with ye all
who call upon his name;
I am a hard skull,
and yet I melt and soften
in his love;
I lie out here in God's acre,
and yet I am in Paradise.
All suffering is forgotten.
His great love has, for our sakes,
made him bear the cross
and climb the way to Golgotha.

**THIRD QUESTION: HOW CAN I BE SURE OF THE RISEN CHRIST?**

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."  

---John 20:24-29

**Rose Again from the Dead**

There is a small thirteenth-century miniature from Cologne that depicts the decisive encounter of Jesus with doubting Thomas. Christ, followed by his disciples, steps through the church door while Thomas stands outside, ready to test Jesus by placing his hand in the nail prints. There are some significant details in this scene. Jesus stretches his arms over Thomas like a cross. It is as though the unhappy seeker already stood under the cross without realizing it. While he yet doubts, he is already touched by that gesture of Jesus' blessing. The lines in the figure of Thomas have about them a tense excitement. It seems as though Thomas is saying, "Everything depends on what happens in the next few moments. Nothing less than my identity is at stake. Am I saved, or have I fallen prey to a gigantic illusion that will leave me spiritually bankrupt?" But one final intimation of the painter is the most astounding of all. Although he stands outside in a state of unmastered doubt, Thomas is encircled by a halo, the aura of a saint. He is already enveloped by rays of glory that Jesus' other followers still lack, even though they appear secure in their discipleship.

What kind of figure is this, surrounded by doubt and hope at the same time? In a few strokes I would like to try to sketch a portrait of this man for you.

Here we are confronted by one of the New Testament stories that don't lend themselves to theology or formula. What sort of

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1 It is in the Gospel-book from Great St. Martin's in Cologne, which dates from 1250. (Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels.)
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Theological doctrine would be distilled from this story? Could one, for instance, formulate from this story the thesis that faith requires confirmation by experience? That is, that one cannot hold something to be true unless one has established it by all means of verification (beginning with eyesight and sense of touch)? Obviously, our story resists being pressed into such a mold. Indeed, Jesus expressly rejects the idea that faith is based on proof from experience. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Perhaps one could formulate just the opposite thesis on the basis of Jesus' words and say that faith is not really true faith if it wants to "see" and "experience." True faith, rather, is blind. Without any reassurance, faith must take the risk of falling blindly, so to speak, at the Lord's feet. But even this thesis doesn't work, for Jesus lets Thomas see and feel! That may be illogical; it may be theologically "questionable"; but that's what Jesus did. So Jesus foils our attempts at theologizing.

It is a good thing to encounter a story that cannot be neatly pigeonholed. It quite definitely trains one in openness of mind, in hearing and accepting surprises. In addition (and this too is good!), a story that is so illogical and that resists all doctrinaire formulations reminds us that Holy Scripture is always greater than our minds, even greater than our theology, and that an expansive power lurks within it. No matter how industriously and cleverly we dig our intellectual canals, they cannot contain or channel the wealth of Scripture; it floods over us in its surge and its fullness, drowning in its waters the old theological know-it-all called Adam.

Now let us begin by looking at the figures who appear in our text. The fact that Thomas, the doubter, comes to believe is due in no small measure to the miracle of the fellowship. We must first devote our attention to this group.

Certainly we cannot say that Thomas was a so-called "leading member" of the congregation, or even that he was a "model Christian." By current standards, he would be classified as "on the fringe" or perhaps even as an "intellectual radical." At crucial moments in the life of the fellowship, he had not exactly demon-strated staying power. To be sure, he had not separated himself from the fellowship of the disciples, but he wasn't exactly a pillar, either. He was not a man endowed with rousing, consoling, and encouraging words.

Nevertheless, in a certain sense he was faithful. He was even ready to die with Jesus. In spite of that, there was a crippling hopelessness about him. Time and again he came out with things that the others hardly dared think about in their most anxious moments. "What are we fighting and preaching for?" was the burden of his questioning. "We don't know what will come of this whole venture, and yet we have invested our lives in it." "We do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"—those were his actual words as he talked aloud to himself (John 14:5).

Of course the others were just as much in the dark about whether or not they were serving a lost cause, but Thomas said openly that he didn't know. And once this is spoken, the door is open to the specter of fear. We know how it goes when people speak out in that way. Suppose you have heard a good sermon—not as good and not as authoritative as Jesus would have preached, but still a good, rousing sermon. Right afterward someone says to you (and his words fall heavy on your ear), "Granted it was a good sermon, but outside the masses pour from factory doors without having heard it. What will happen to us if the masses remain without a shepherd and if secularism stifles all searching for God? What use is one good sermon when we need a revival throughout the country? Aren't we heading for collectivism, robots, and cities like anthills? Where is Jesus going? Isn't it all fruitless in the end, and isn't the night coming, when no man can work?"

Even if we have silently thought the same thing ourselves a hundred times, something like that is paralyzing. And that was certainly Thomas' constant effect.

Finally, he absented himself completely from the gatherings of the disciples. He no longer put up the "opposition" but, like a wounded animal, cowered into his burrow. If the disciples, the fellowship, had then said, "Thank heaven we're free of that fault-
finding wet blanket,” we would understand perfectly. But that is just what they did not say; they remained faithful to Thomas. They kept him posted on their experience with Jesus. And they obviously told him in such a way that he felt himself buoyed up by their brotherliness, so that he brought himself to return to their fellowship at the decisive moment.

At any rate, this fellowship is no society of the ninety-nine righteous ones, eager to get together in order to form an association for undisturbed mutual edification. They endured the uncomfortable presence of a man who could disturb them acutely and who constantly teetered on the brink of heresy. In other words, it was not a closed group or party intent on homogeneous exclusiveness, nor was it a chemically pure denomination, permitting no one to step out of line. Notice: they endured a man who doubted the resurrection, the basic teaching of Christianity. If he held office in any self-respecting church today, he would certainly be saddled with a heresy trial. And if the members didn’t go that far, it would not usually be because they were willing to “bear with” the annoyance; it would likely be because they didn’t take the church too seriously. They would tell themselves, “In the general church game a few ‘extreme’ or ‘liberal’ elements don’t matter. The rest of us, after all, are pretty good plants, and we can endure the weeds until things can be sorted out on Judgment Day. Then finally—finally!—we at God’s right hand can once again be by ourselves, undisturbed.”

That is, of course, the reason why no revivals and no awakenings break out among us; that is why we have so few Thomas miracles. Where we have nominal members on one side and friendly tolerance on the other, no sparks are likely to fly. No one catches fire. Thomas must have noticed that it pained the disciples’ fellowship not to be permitted his complete presence, and that it hurt them that he had excluded himself from the blessing which they shared. He bore deep wounds in his heart, but precisely for that reason he must have been moved to see that his brothers suffered pain on his account. In the Kingdom of God the prescription runs, “Wounds heal wounds.” Which of us feels a twinge in his heart when he uses the popular phrase, “those on the outside,” or, “the fringe members of the church”? Haven’t nearly all of us classified our environment into Christian and heathen, believing and doubting, active and indifferent? But he who wants to save men’s souls, concerning himself with doubters and secular mankind, must suffer pain. Otherwise he doesn’t “bear with” the other person, he merely “bears” him. When he bears him, then the other lets himself be borne, that is, he remains neutral and is assuredly not on hand when Jesus’ appearance behind locked doors is in the offering. I fear, however, that in such a case Jesus never comes at all. Behind the unblessed, hermetically sealed doors, people without Thomas go on whining for an awakening or a new power of the Spirit that will rouse the valley of dead bones. They forge “strategies,” carry on “public relations,” organize great conferences, and resort to all sorts of gimmicks. But nothing happens. The miracle of Pentecost fails to occur. How could it be otherwise?

Then there is Thomas himself. Thomas—We all are like him, of course, or at least one voice in us is. Let’s see precisely how he doubts, for there is one way of doubting that contains a promise and another that does not.

We hear of Thomas’ doubt in the story of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:16). It happens like this: In Jerusalem there has been a growing consolidation of powers hostile to Jesus. Thomas, like everyone else, has assumed Jesus will bring in the theocracy and set up a reign of peace. Then it is possible (and this is the question of doubt) for this assumption to be correct when the force of the Messiah, instead of making headway and in fact winning, only creates a counterforce? And then what happens when, in a dark and depressing hour, the feeling arises that the counterforce is actually growing stronger and that one’s own chances for the long-awaited “Christianization” are proportionately dimmer? What sort of dismal prophecies are these that clutch at the heart? If they prove accurate, isn’t the assumption that Jesus is victor over the world false? The introspective Thomas grapples with tormenting thoughts like these. He becomes depressed.

Then comes a last drop which brings this cup of gloom to
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overflowing: Lazarus dies. So, in other words, there is something that is stronger than Jesus, namely, death. If death can drag off the friend of Jesus as booty, that means he can seize even Jesus himself.

Perhaps this experience contributed to the fact that, later, Thomas was not able to believe the resurrection of Jesus either. Golgotha proved the case; there death carried things to a conclusion and took the friend of Lazarus too. If a man has to give in to death, then he cannot be the Savior of the world. Thus Thomas argued and calculated, and therefore he doubted.

Yet it was a special sort of doubt that agitated Thomas. The peculiar feature was that he didn't turn, say, to the Pharisees, or to philosophy, or to some other world view for security. All of us want something certain to hang on to. So did Thomas. But still he didn't leave; he said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." That is certainly the most disconsolate statement in the Bible. It is the speech of a man with empty hands, bereft of hope.

But if Jesus calls the poor "blessed," shouldn't that also imply a promise for those who are poor in faith, who are downcast and hopeless? That must have been the case with Thomas. His hopelessness did not seduce him into seeking other hopes. He was ready to die in his hopelessness and perish in faithfulness.

Now we must try to understand that the divine promise is already active in this sort of hopelessness. But first we must examine Thomas' hopelessness still more closely, for what we have said so far does not yet fathom the deepest secret of that hopelessness. Thomas didn't want just to die. He didn't want something merely negative. He wanted to bind the hopelessly lost cause of his life with the lost cause of the Nazarene. He was ready not merely to die, but to die with the very man in whom he had placed all his hope. If I am ready to die with another, then I surrender myself to him absolutely; I wager my entire existence on him. And that is exactly what Thomas did. Therefore, clouds of blessing floated above his hopelessness. He did not bind his fate to Jesus because he hoped that by so doing he would become rich, happy, or comparatively free, or perhaps would even be

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able to expect a cabinet post in the messianic kingdom. He did not give himself to Jesus in order to obtain something else.

If Thomas lived today he would certainly not give himself to Jesus in order to save the Christian West or to have some sort of counter-ideology against the East. All of those things for which he also might hope (the salvation of his people by the religious leader Jesus, peace among men, the propagation of a world-transforming view of love) had vanished like a dream, like a beautiful dream. Thomas certainly had had such dreams. There isn't a Christian who hasn't dreamed them at some time or other.

But Thomas was completely without hope. So he did not hold to Jesus in the hope of getting something. He held to him because he loved him, because he was faithful to him, and because he wanted to die with him. It was precisely his complete hopelessness that forced him to the primary, central thing, the person of the Savior himself.

I only wish that we, too, had a dose of this divine hopelessness within us, so that we didn't yet know what clouds of blessing floated above us and had no intimation of whose hands held us.

However, let us (as comrades of doubting Thomas) allow our hidden hopelessness to stand for once: the concern, for example, that no awakening will again sweep across our land, that secularism and indifference will continue to grow, that the trend toward a mass society will increase, that the Lord will more and more disprove the lordship of Jesus, and that only a few old people will still huddle around the altars. With one brave, heroic, despairing blow, let us free ourselves from all dreams of re-Christianizing culture and even from optimistic church statistics. Let's be clear for once that we Christians may become very lonely people, and that the last old woman who still listens to us (even in this "promised land") will one day die, and that then the onetime preacher can peldie door to door. For once let's not console ourselves by saying that this is the "tribulation" that Jesus predicted. Let us rather expect the cold, chilling, furtive thoughts that will come then; let us entertain the possibility that all this could be a refutation of Jesus Christ and, therefore, that he had left us, as Jean Paul once expressed it, as waifs without a father,
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and that he himself was a poor orphan lad. This would mean that we had been taken in by a terrible deception.

Let us not cease doubting too soon! Repressed doubts are bad; they smoulder on. And our faith should certainly not be the product of repression! Let us maintain this extreme hopelessness as Thomas did. For, as Luther said, "Testing teaches us to heed the Word." But if we doubt in that way, we won't want to run away or die or put a bullet through our head. Then our final word will be, "All right, then, I'll just die with him. Was he wrong? All right, then I will be wrong too. I'll profess his error, then; I'll not disdain him but rather fall into the abyss with him."

If I say that, then I have cast myself on Jesus in a way that no one who secretly lives on other hopes can do. Then I am his disciple totally and to the end. I am his disciple only and not a secret devotee of a Christian civilization (some sort of effective Christian counterslogan against the East, which would not really obligate me to anything). In that case my complete hopelessness (precisely that, of all things) has driven me to him.

Therefore, even the poor in hope are blessed. For they alone have died their fate to Jesus, even if in despair. And Jesus does not let us down. Our hopes deceive everybody. Our life, you know, is full of disappointment. Our plans don't work out; we have to conquer long dry stretches in our lives; and many people whom we trust fail to keep their promises. But Jesus does not let us down.

We should serenely (or despairingly, as far as I am concerned) lay the responsibility of proof upon him. We may say to him, "Show me what you've got, and if there's nothing to you, then nothing else matters, either." And Jesus shows what he has. I am tempted to recount the story of my doubting-Thomas-nature in which this experiment with Jesus was tried, but I won't. One thing, however, is sure: the hopeless doubters have one decisive chance. All the props are knocked out from under them; now they are thrown on Jesus himself without knowing whether or not this foundation will hold. But in testing this last support they are dealing with Jesus alone, and that is the greatest opportunity for our faith.

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Now Jesus, and he alone, has the floor, and he says, "Blessed are the poor; blessed are the poor in hope; blessed are the doubting who are willing to die with me, for with such I am willing to live." That may be consoling sometime, when we are at our wits' end, with all human possibilities shattered and all exits blocked. Then can come the moment when we say, "This is it. Now God is my only defense. Now I can only let myself fall into the dark like a child."

Have we understood, therefore, that Thomas' doubt is of a quite special kind? In any case, it is not to be equated with that blase doubt that fairly bursts with self-assurance, and even less with that false snobbish doubt that wants only to argue without getting involved. Involvement is Thomas' salient characteristic. He throws himself and all he has into the balance. He is prepared to die for his doubt. He is not ready to spare his old life by avoiding Jesus' questioning eyes. His longing doubts hunger for the truth. Therefore, not only the promise, "Blessed are the poor," but also "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst" are valid for him.

We have to take a look at the background of our text; then we can understand it rightly. It is, as we have seen, the last act in the drama of doubt. It portrays the moment in which doubt reaches its climax and in which all the promises come to fulfillment.

Thomas is once again in the fellowship. He has been, so to speak, "loved into it." The disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord. He came through locked doors." Of course, this report cannot satisfy the doubter's deep honesty. That, too, is characteristic of him.

"You say he came through locked doors?" asks Thomas. And he adds to himself, "It could have been a spirit. And spirits that people think they see are usually products of their own imagination."

So this report does not satisfy Thomas. He is willing to believe only if the preseace of the risen One is real. He is not interested in "ideas" or "spirits" which are reasonable facsimiles of the genuine article.

While Thomas is thus doubting, Jesus again comes through the locked doors, and says, "Peace be with you." He doesn't say,
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"Peace be with you—except Thomas, because he has no peace—he is quarreling with me." He includes the dear doubter in his salutation of peace. And not only that—he even addresses him immediately, commanding him to place his hands in the prints of the wounds.

That is a grand and comforting thing. Jesus' attitude to this poor doubter—to us poor doubters—becomes clear.

We must begin by discovering that Jesus is not angry with Thomas about his questioning. Instead, Jesus lets him know that he understands. That is the last thing we can hold to when doubt comes over us: Jesus knows about us, but he does not doubt us in return. He is far from doubting us when we doubt him. (He has even taken our doubt upon himself. Didn't he go through that fearful agony when he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He has borne our doubt in exactly the same way that he bore our guilt and our death.)

Next, Jesus does not wait until Thomas asks him; he is suddenly there, unasked, with his answer—and in a way that Thomas had never dreamed of. This is another illustration of Paul Gerhard's words, "He will act in a way that will amaze you."

Finally, Jesus does not come to him with a "theory" about faith. He doesn't say something like, "Your request is not quite legitimate, theologically speaking. In reference to me, the appropriate posture is not seeing, feeling, or experiencing; it is blind faith."

That's the way we theologians always speak in our discussions. And that's why so few people believe us. It would certainly have been true if Jesus had said that. For faith is actually independent of verification by sight and touch. But in that moment, such a truth would have been an excessive demand to place on Thomas. He simply wasn't far enough along to have been able to bear that truth. Were he alive today, then there would be plenty of answers from philosophers like Kant and Jaspers; and in a twinkling a furious debate would arise, ending (as most debates do) in smoke.

Jesus, however, does something quite different. He does the completely unexpected. He lowers himself to this poor doubter.

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"Seeing is really not important," Jesus may be thinking, "but Thomas is still a poor beginner, an amateur at faith. He still has no idea of what's really essential." Yet that does not hinder Jesus from yielding to this poor beginner in faith. Jesus didn't act properly, one might say. He didn't act in conformity with the prescriptions laid down in dogmatic textbooks under the heading, "Christology." He would certainly have lost points in a theological examination! Notice, please, that Thomas' request, innocent though it may be, places a condition on the Lord. He says, in effect, "Do thus and so, otherwise I will not believe in you." May one speak this way? No, one may not so speak; it is not proper. But Jesus does the improper. He does what the phrase of Paul's, "by faith alone," seems to contradict directly. Jesus shows himself to Thomas; he lets him see and touch a little. The Son of man is not only lord of the sabbath (Mark 2:28); he is also lord over dogmas, and, even more, over the methods of handling those dogmas.

The fact that Jesus became man means that he wants to bring man back from the depths of his life. Jesus' activity is always downward in its motion. Thus, in this encounter he lowers himself yet another time, going just a little bit deeper—not only to the level of the human heart, but right down to the fingertips.

This may also be instructive for us who are witnesses of Jesus. Perhaps we know someone who hasn't the slightest inkling of the correctness of orthodox belief and who therefore is so much the more depressed by uneasiness and anxiety. Should we give him a lecture about the Holy Trinity or the mysteries of predestination? Or should we do as Kierkegaard did and start out by simply describing" to him what it is like when Jesus comes into our life: namely, that one finds something like peace; that that is a very fine thing; and that one then sees the whole world with new eyes? Of course, that could smack of emotionalism and subjective experience. Such ways of putting the matter certainly do not contain the ultimate mysteries of the faith, either.

But if we spoke in that way, we would show that we did not consider ourselves somehow or other above bending to such a person's poor amateurish faith. Perhaps we would understand us.
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Then an occasion might arise for us to say, "You know, faith doesn’t depend on subjective emotion, or on seeing and feeling. The case is, rather: Blessed are those who do not feel and yet believe." It is at the end, however, that Jesus says this, and not at the beginning. It is very like the progression from milk to solid food. We should learn a little from Jesus in this matter of how to speak to our neighbor.

And now we look on and are amazed; Thomas is conquered by faith. He exclaims, "My Lord and my God."

What, precisely, brought him to his knees? Was it really the unique opportunity he had to touch Jesus? Was it that he was permitted an experiential proof of the risen One’s reality? That would be a bad break for us. We don’t have that chance anymore, and for us Thomas can be no more than the subject of an historical incident.

Or could it possibly have been something entirely different, perhaps the fact that Jesus lowered himself as he did, that conquered him? Was he simply overpowered by the fact that someone did scorn his poor doubt, that is, that someone stepped to his side and did not place himself and his resurrection glory above Thomas? Was it that he thus discovered the infinite love which sought him and followed after him? Did he see how Jesus left the faithful community of disciples standing there and sought him, him alone, although he had nothing to offer?

I’m sure that we would have no difficulty answering the question as to which of these two actions conquered Thomas. If it had been the experiential touching and seeing, then he would have come up with something like a medical diagnosis: "Yes, it all fits. The nail prints are discernible and they are genuine. He is the one. He is actually risen and alive." Thus Thomas would have had to speak of Jesus in the third person, "He" is alive; "it" fits. But that is precisely what he did not do; he said "you" to him. He said, "My Lord and my God."

Immediately, the matter of touching, feeling, and experiencing became inconsequential. We are never told whether Thomas acted on Jesus’ offer at all, that is, whether he really placed his hands in the woundprints. All of that immediately fades into the background and becomes unimportant. It either never even happened or it no longer needed to be mentioned at all.

Then does Thomas’ belief really rest simply on seeing and touching Jesus? Would his heart have remained spiritually dead without the aid of his fingertips? And are we poor souls of the twentieth century lost for sure, since we obviously can no longer perform the fingertip test?

No, Thomas’ belief does not rest on seeing and touching. When he says, "My Lord and my God," he is expressing infinitely more than he could have seen and felt. He says, "My Lord." Mere seeing and touching can never produce anything like that.

To cite a parallel situation, think of an historian investigating the Resurrection. Even if he should come to the scientific conclusion that the historical documentation for the resurrection of Jesus was without loopholes of any kind and beyond all doubt, would he experience anything more than a great shock or bewildered astonishment in the presence of an historical anomaly? This line of procedure would never bring him to confess, "My Lord and my God." The fact that Thomas did not simply say "it fits," but rather "my Lord" shows that he recognized the Lord by his love and not by physical characteristics, just as Mary had probably done on Easter morning.

The fact of Jesus’ presenting himself to sight and touch is thus placed back in its proper perspective. It was a sort of icebreaker, a loving concession to a blocked-in faith, but it was not the cause of the faith. There is a similar clearing-up operation in our proclamation, too. It has not yet come to the point where faith is born; it merely sweeps up and prepares the cradle.

For instance, I think of Mr. X. He has met some Christians in his life who were just plain lemons and who bitterly disappointed him. How many others have been hurt by a pastor whose egoism or whose life contradicted his preaching, so that Christianity in general became untrustworthy in their eyes? Naturally, even that is not a valid objection to the faith, for faith depends on the Lord himself and not upon imperfect men. But this perfectly true comment is as much help to Mr. X as it would have been for
someone to have told Thomas (with absolute propriety) that faith was not dependent upon experience. Then, in prison, or among his colleagues, or somewhere on vacation, Mr. X meets a Christian who doesn’t say much at all, but who is so thoroughly genuine that his discipleship seems to shine through. One can tell by the way he acts with simple people, by his loyalty, by his selflessness, and by other things of a moral or less definite nature. Mr. X says, “With Mr. Y one feels that his faith gives power to his life,” and Mr. X is at once ready to revise his skepticism. He is also ready to listen, should this man take him along some evening to a group where a section of the Bible is studied, perhaps, or where faith and nihilism are discussed.

Let us suppose for a moment that Mr. X goes along to these meetings fairly frequently out of personal attachment for Mr. Y, and by no means out of a thirst for faith or a need for salvation. Let us suppose he tells himself, “My Christian friend may be a dreamer, but at least he is a dreamer with breadth and determination. He rings true. That illusion which he calls his ‘faith’ can’t be too bad, even for me. It may be nonsense—O.K., then I’ll go down with him.” Let us suppose that he comes to take the first steps of faith in some such roundabout way, and that he touches the robe of Jesus for the very first time. Then he matures bit by bit, from that point on, because Jesus himself has now entered the picture. Who would believe that his friend would take Mr. X aside one day and tell him, “Look here, it was wrong of you to let those no-good Christians you met take your faith away from you, and it is just as wrong if you believe just because you find, or think you find, a bit of Jesus’ glory mirrored in me. Blessed are they who never ‘see’ such men (maybe they crouch in a modern police-state prison and come in contact only with robots). Blessed are they who do not see and yet believe.”

Maybe that’s what happened to Thomas. Jesus’ showing himself to Thomas was an icebreaker, a touching concession to an undeserving skeptic. Jesus did not want to argue with him; he wanted to take him by the hand. And then at the end of this encounter (but really at the end, after love and leading had done their work), then Jesus untied the water wings of support that seeing and touching had provided. Then Thomas must swim for himself. And, as we said before, maybe Thomas never even grasped for the water wings; he may have taken the first strokes of faith boldly, as soon as he saw who was watching over his efforts to stay afloat.

It would be a fine thing if we, as Thomas’ companions in misfortune, could likewise come to the point where we could say, “My Lord and my God” after having doubted so long or having spoken half-blindly about “Christendom” or the “Christian West.”

It would be a fine thing if, in our moments of direst inner turmoil, we ourselves could hold fast to the one thought that, even then, Jesus understands us and keeps us from falling. Blessed are the poor in hope, for they are the ones who may say, “My Lord and my God.” But if we learn to know this about him and become his disciples, may we be given the grace not to exalt ourselves above the doubting Thomases around us. We will no longer want to argue with them, but we will try to show them a little of the glory of Jesus as we understand it, perhaps even without words, letting the simple deed speak for itself. We should not worry about whether that word is letter-perfect and chemically pure in its orthodoxy. The person to whom we are speaking at the time is not going to endorse any “dogma”! He is simply invited to meet the Master and to receive his peace.

We shall never tire of asking that the Lord come to us and to the other doubters, saying in his immeasurable goodness (as he pronounced at the death of Lazarus), “This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God” (John 11:4). And precisely those who are at the end and have lost all their chances shall be the bearers of the promise. They shall be showered with wonders beyond their wildest dreams. And as they stand baffled, looking for a way of escape, I have entered through a different door and already stand beside them.”