
Seeking Food in Toy Shops

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Second Sunday of Easter – Year A**

Leo Tolstoy had everything.

He was arguably the most celebrated author in the world. He had aristocratic wealth, a large family, the respect of everyone who knew him. And he was dying inside. The question that kept pressing against him in the dark was simple and unanswerable: what is the meaning of my life?

The more he analyzed it, the worse it got. He tried philosophy. He tried science. He tried achievement. None of it reached the place that was hungry. He was, as he put it himself, in the position of a man seeking food in toy shops. He hid the ropes in his study so he wouldn't hang himself in the night.

In desperation, he finally gave up the frantic search and turned simply to living. He focused on his wife and children. He cared for the people around him. He let his religious doubts go and turned to a simple, direct faith. And he found, to his surprise, that he finally understood the meaning of his life.

The meaning had been hidden in the love he already had.

Tolstoy's problem was that he had been living almost entirely in his head — in the part of himself that measures and compares and demands answers — and almost never in the part where meaning, love, and faith actually live. The cure was not a technique. It was consent — and consent requires more intention and will than it sounds. To his wife, his children, his work, his faith. To the ordinary life that had been waiting for him all along.

We live in a moment when that consent is harder than it has ever been. The technological order we inhabit is not neutral. It pulls us relentlessly toward the measuring, comparing, analyzing part of ourselves — and away from the quieter part where we actually know what matters. It tells us, over and over again, that love is something we have to go get. The longer we live this way, the harder it becomes to consent to anything we cannot verify.

Thomas was seeking food in toy shops.

We have called him Doubting Thomas for two thousand years, as if doubt were the most interesting thing about him. But read the story again. What Thomas says is very specific:

“unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

That is not doubt. That is a man who has decided exactly what kind of evidence he will trust. He wants something he can see and touch and verify. He wants proof that can be measured. He is doing what Tolstoy did — bringing all his considerable intelligence to bear on the one question that intelligence cannot answer.

We have been doing the same thing ever since. Look at how the great painters depicted this scene — and there are dozens of them, across centuries. Almost without exception they show Thomas's finger pressed into the wound, Jesus guiding his hand, the face twisted with the effort of verification. Caravaggio. Rembrandt. Guercino. All of them reaching for the same image: tactile proof, the wound examined, the body tested against the claim.

It is unforgettable; it is also almost certainly wrong.

The text does not say Thomas touches the wounds. Jesus offers them. And Thomas responds not with his hands but with his voice: "My Lord and my God." The painters could only picture what their measuring minds already understood. They drew the verification that Thomas demanded. They missed the encounter that he received. And in doing so they told us more about themselves than about Thomas.

Look again at what Jesus does and how Thomas reacts.

Jesus comes. Through locked doors. Uninvited. On Thomas's schedule, not his own. He does not wait for Thomas to work through his doubt or arrive at a more generous epistemology. He simply appears, goes directly to Thomas, and offers exactly what Thomas asked for. "Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."

Jesus meets Thomas in the toy shop. That's his move. Not a rebuke. Not a lecture on the importance of trusting your friends. He walks through the locked door, he stands in front of the man who said he would not believe, and he gives him everything he asked for — and more. In that moment, Thomas knows without a doubt that he is loved.

Let me try to show you what I'm talking about.

Imagine sailing in thick fog. Maybe in Maine, where the water is cold and the shore is rocky. Ordinary navigation becomes impossible. The usual landmarks disappear. Straining to see harder doesn't help.

Imagine that, instead of gripping tighter, you do something counterintuitive. You let go. You stop straining. You allow yourself to simply be present in the fog.

Something shifts. You find you can feel the current beneath the hull, the change in the wind. A sailor paying attention with their whole body can feel the cold rising off the water and smell the salt and the mud. The knowing arrives — but not through straining. It arrives whole, all at once, the way you sometimes know something without knowing how you know it.

Quiet. Reliable. Given rather than grasped.

I imagine that this what happened to Thomas. He came into that room with his demand. And Jesus appeared — came to him, walked through the locked door to find him specifically — and something broke through that no amount of verification could have reached.

You can hear it in Thomas' response: "My Lord and my God!"

Not just a sequence of thoughts, but a spontaneous awakening.

Thomas had a felt sense that he was loved unconditionally by the source of life itself.

Thomas wanted proof. Jesus gave him encounter. And the encounter gave him what the proof never could have.

Now here is what the story does not tell you — but tradition does.

Thomas went to India.

The man we spent two thousand years calling the doubter ended up on the other side of the world, starting communities that are still alive today. That is what the encounter does. It doesn't settle you down. It sends you out — into a different level of consciousness, into a different way of being in the world, into joy that has somewhere to go.

There is a sponadic energy that we feel when we know that we are being love and consent to it. It has a selfless, radiant, and non-possessive character. It impels us to go out and love others. You find yourself giving yourself to others that they may live.

Jesus is still making the move. Still walking through locked doors. Still coming to find the people who have decided exactly what kind of evidence they will accept — and offering them something better than evidence. He meets us in the fog. He meets us in the locked room. He meets us in the ordinary life, waiting to be inhabited rather than analyzed.

Stop straining. Receive what is given. And then go.

This is what Jesus is asking us to do.

Stop straining. Receive what is given. And then go.

The world needs people who will go to India.

Thomas went.

Will you?

Amen.

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