

## **On the writing (and reading) of books**

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2nd Sunday of Easter - April 24, 2022

Text: John 20:19-31

Revelation 1:4-8

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

John 20.19-31

*The day referred to is the first Easter, the day of Jesus' resurrection.*

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, 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 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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, 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. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 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 have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

These signs are written so that you may come to believe, and that through believing you may have life in the name which is Logos, the Word; the name which is Alpha and Omega; A to Z, first and last and everything in between.

These things are written so you may read, believe, and live.

Take a risk. Open a book. Any book, really. Notice the fine print on the fly leaf. Do you see the caution? Reading can be hazardous to your self-assurance and personal worldview. Oh, it's not there? It should be. Books are dangerous. They hold ideas. Open the book, ideas swarm out and into you. Into the world. They challenge things. They change things. Take a risk. It might even change you.



If books weren't dangerous, why would a right-wing Danish politician threaten to burn the Koran in Sweden during the holy month of Ramadan? Why would his threat spark violent protests leaving dozens of people injured? The man claims that burning books is a tribute to free speech.<sup>1</sup> I think it's a covert admission of fear, fear of how that book might change the world. If only he knew: Fear is the opposite of love.

Perfect love casts out fear.

There was actually one time when book burning proved useful. It was in about 1200 BCE, when the Canaanite city of Ugarit, in present-day Syria, was sacked and burned. Writing then was done on soft clay tablets by poking the sharp end of a reed into the clay in patterns to make words. Tedious! The writing is cuneiform; amazingly, it's the ancestor of our modern A-B-Cs. After reading, the clay was smoothed over and re-used. When the libraries burned, the tablets turned into—ceramics! Some survived. Rediscovered in the 20th century, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, they help us understand our Bible better. Changed how we read the Word.



John begins his story of Jesus' life like this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This is how he ends the story: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." John has this conviction that the frail vehicles of word, sign, and story can carry the weight of divine mystery, of divine love with the power to heal human hearts and save human souls. How do we know this?

John self-identifies as trustworthy, someone whose words are true. How would I know? I never met the guy! Would that more people took Thomas as a role model, not some kind of idiot.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/19/what-do-we-know-about-the-sweden-riots>

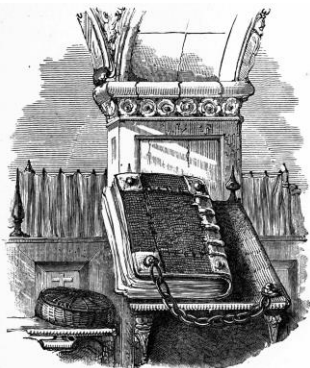
Called him not Doubting Thomas but Questioning Thomas. Today he'd be saying, "Where's the data? Show me the proof. I need documentation." This is a *good* thing. Read. But read with some healthy skepticism. *Then* believe as you are persuaded, and live.

For two-thirds of the history of Christianity, from Jesus' time until the mid-1400s, the only way to make a new book was to copy it out by hand. And, naturally, mistakes were made. Versions ended up just a little bit different from each other. Sometimes a lot different. Which are trustworthy? Which are true? How can you tell? Read some more. Compare. Test the words: which speak most clearly of a God of love, a God of life? Believe those words, and live.

Some hand-made copies were fancier than others, like the intricate, symbol-laden 8th century Irish Book of Kells: the image here is just two Greek letters, Chi and Rho, an abbreviation of the word for Christ. (I keep images from the Book of Kells on my wall to remind myself that words used to be processed differently. More slowly. More carefully. But we've come a long way from cuneiform, baby!) Sad to say, the word could be abused. Four centuries earlier, the Roman Emperor Constantine put the Chi-Rho sign on his soldiers' shields as they marched into war to pillage, plunder, and slaughter under the banner of Christ. Language is powerful. Be careful how you use it. Read widely. Read deeply. Read judiciously: check your sources. Be a *Testing* Questioning Thomas. And then prepare to be changed. Read. Believe. Live.



After Gutenberg developed the movable type printing press around 1440 things really took off in the world of books. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German: it's been called his "most dangerous act." Then a guy named William Tyndale translated it into English. He actually wasn't the first. Already, you could be put to death for owning even part of an English Bible (now that's really dangerous reading!) Isn't it a little ironic that the book gathering dust on so many shelves was once so prized that people risked their lives to read it? But Tyndale dug deep in his translating. He exposed the truth that Henry VIII, king of many wives, did not, in the view of the Bible, speak with divine authority as he claimed. His actions were not sanctioned by God. Tyndale was burned at the stake for heresy, for truth-telling.<sup>2</sup> But Henry's chief advisor later had an English Bible placed in every church, actually chained to the pulpit so that anyone lucky enough to know how to read might have access to it, not just the rich and powerful.<sup>3</sup> Tyndale's dying prayer was that the king's eyes would be opened.<sup>4</sup> Apparently it was answered.



<sup>2</sup> Thanks to my friend Melece for alerting me to this noteworthy bit of biblical history!

<sup>3</sup> A lack of access to information is still one of the greatest causes and effects of poverty today.

<sup>4</sup> Don't take my word for it. Read for yourself: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Tyndale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Tyndale)

Take a risk. Open the book. Read the Word. But be warned: it may be hazardous to your power and prestige. The Word can be dangerous in a different way, when it's used for personal advantage, like when we take our own prejudices and wrap them up in a little scrap of Scripture and mold them into Bible bullets. Like slave owners teaching enslaved people that the Bible says, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters as you would obey Christ"<sup>5</sup> but then punishing them for reading it for themselves. For learning to read at all they could be whipped, their hands cut off. It's a miracle any actually came to believe that the Christian God was a God of love. But those who secretly learned to read discovered<sup>6</sup>: the Bible *as a whole* is a manifesto of freedom. Read in full, it declares that it is contrary to God's will to hold another person as property. Other Bible bullets have been aimed at women, people of other colors, creeds, and cultures, of differing gender orientations and affiliations. Why do people arm themselves this way? Surely out of fear, and out of ignorance. Maybe they need to broaden their reading, and open their minds. Perfect love, God's love, casts out fear.



So read. Read it all. Read carefully. Read fearlessly. Form your own conclusions. Believe. Live.

No one has read the Bible more carefully than those who translate it. One of the few good things to emerge from Western "Christian" nations' ruthless colonization of other lands is that sometimes in translating the Bible, they created written language where only spoken language existed before. And in the process, the translators themselves were changed, because they learned to see through the eyes of their audience, as did those translating for people who had never seen sheep. The translators searched for an animal that represented the same qualities of innocence and vulnerability as a lamb. They found one: the frog. "See," John the Baptist would say to these people, "the frog of God who bears the sin of the world." Sound strange? It's no accident that the frog is a known indicator or sentinel species; like the canary in the coal mine, they are the first to succumb to poison. When frogs disappear from an ecosystem, we know that the Christ we know as the natural world is crucified again. Read the signs, ignore them at our peril. Believe enough to change and your grandchildren may yet have a chance to live on this perishing planet.



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<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22. No kidding. But it's not the whole truth.

<sup>6</sup> Pictured painting: Thomas Waterman Wood, *Sunday Morning*, ca. 1877, oil on paperboard mounted on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Francis P. Garvan, 1979.5.

The risen Christ passed through locked doors to greet his disciples. His spoken Word breathed life and peace into them. The signs written on his body persuaded Questioning Testing Thomas. And John wrote down this particular story in his own words, out of all those he might have recorded, so that we, who have not seen, might believe and, believing, have life.



Yes, these words, these ideas, these stories and a lot more that I left out, came to me as I was pondering the life of our friend and teacher, Margaret. She knew the power of words, both spoken and written. What besides ideas can really pass through prison doors and unlock the power of a mind? And how are ideas to be known, unless they are written and read and shared without hindrance, without burning or weaponizing them? And how can we believe unless truth is documented and corroborated, substantiated by experience? Be like Thomas, testing and questing.

Be like Margaret. Read widely, deeply, fearlessly, judiciously. Take a risk. Open a book. Read it. Believe if you can, believe as Spirit leads you. Believe for yourself. But be warned. You may be changed. Thanks be to God.

### **Prayers**

God, grant us courage, grant us wisdom for the living of these difficult hours and days. Show us what you require of us, so that we may live your love in a world desperate for peace and healing. May each person's story be valued, and each life be heard as you hear them: with tenderness and compassion.

And teach us to forgive where ignorance and fear masquerade as power and righteousness. Teach us to share what you have given us with humility and generosity, not placing ourselves above those who think differently.

We rejoice in the eternal return of life and health to the world, in the story of resurrection, in the greening of the earth. Give us confidence in your abiding, universal love—but help us never to take it for granted.

Even as we pray for all people, we also lift up to you those you have given us as our own gift and task to love and care for: those in sickness, transition, or any form of difficulty; for all those still grieving the loss of a precious friend in Margaret Nelson. Even as we mourn, we give thanks for all the blessings she shared in her life. All this and all that remains unspoken in our hearts we offer to you, praying as Jesus taught us.....