

Today is Evolution Sunday – our church’s yearly commemoration of our conviction that science and religion are not forever locked in pitched battle. I should probably begin by admitting that I’m a social scientist, so I bring no insight into modern biology, chemistry, or physics. But I have studied both religion and science as *social practices*, and I have arrived at something like a grand unified theory for how we can relate our faith with our scientific knowledge.

In our scriptures for today, we have two characters, the teacher or king from Ecclesiastes and Thomas. These two men are both conducting investigations of sorts. The king seeks to understand everything that happens in the world – he wants to accumulate as much knowledge as he can. And say what you want about the king, but he has no self-esteem problems: he tells us that he’s gained more wisdom than any other ruler before him. But he concludes that the more he learns, the more sorrow he experiences. The information he absorbs does not fill him with the understanding he seeks. He’s looking for something else, something that he can’t study.

Then we have Thomas, who has a very different investigation. Thomas wasn’t around when the resurrected Lord appeared to the disciples – rotten luck, if you ask me. And they tell him that Jesus is back, that he’s not cold and dead. Thomas responds simply: “Show me.” Thomas has to see Jesus, feel his wounds, before he accepts what he hears. A week goes by – one week! I want you to think about what that week must have been like for Thomas and his friends, who have had very different experiences. A week later, they’re all together – this time Thomas is with them. I imagine that he just stayed with the other disciples all the time, just waiting for something to happen. Jesus appears to all of them, even though the doors are locked – this is a not-so-subtle way of telling us that this is a miracle. Jesus greets the disciples, and allows Thomas to see for himself. Thomas can only respond in awe – this is one of my favorite passages of scripture – “My Lord and my God!”

Both of these stories relate to what philosophers call epistemology. Epistemology is the study of what we know and how we know it. Epistemology is how someone with a Ph. D says, “How do you know?” When Thomas says that he has to see Jesus in order to believe he’s back, he’s making an epistemological statement: he trusts his eyeballs more than his friends. And this question of how we know is at the very core of our society’s angst over religion and science.

If you’re like me, you were taught a very particular understanding of how knowledge works. We’re taught in Western society to put information into two categories – the things we *know* and the things we *believe*. Facts and opinions – two separate groups. And in this model, science is the realm of objective facts – things that are true regardless of what we believe. Religion, on the other hand, is just a set of opinions that can’t be verified. And part of the reason we like this model is because it very clearly separates our scientific ways of knowing from our religious ways of knowing. If this model still held up, we wouldn’t have so much cultural combat over science and religion. But this model doesn’t hold up. Over the last century, we have wrestled with the unsettling idea that scientific knowledge is as much a product of our social context as our religious or political beliefs. Science is a human construction, built on human ideas. We can no longer clearly separate our knowledge into those two old categories – facts and beliefs. The scientific way of knowing, once the pinnacle of human understanding, is now on the same level as our beliefs and ideologies. We started out like Thomas, insisting on the importance of our

observations, and we have ended up like the king from Ecclesiastes, unable to find truth no matter how hard we look.

My friends, it's time for us to admit to ourselves that absolute truth is beyond our grasp. There are two kinds of people who will object to this. Religious fundamentalists will say that they have pure truth in the form of scripture and religious authority. Scientific fundamentalists will say that they have the real truth – through empirical data and reason. But they're both wrong. Religion and science can grasp at truth, but they cannot hold it tightly. Our truths are always provisional, whether they be religious or scientific.

Now, at this point, you're probably thinking, "What does any of this have to do with evolution?" And here's the answer – the resolution to the debate over evolution is only going to come when we think more clearly about *how we know*.

Science has a very particular way of knowing. Scientific knowledge comes from empirical data – observations. The scientist uses her senses to watch natural phenomena, then tries to find a simple explanation for what is happening. The scientific community regulates itself through the process of peer review – just because I see something in a lab doesn't mean that other scientists will accept its truth. Only after observations and conclusions have been tested over and over again can they be accepted as provisional explanations.

Religious people also have their particular ways of knowing. As Christians, we rely on the Holy Scriptures for our truth. When we seek an answer, we first open the Bible, because we believe it to be the word of God. But because the Bible must be interpreted, we submit ourselves to a body of believers. This group, this church, helps us to live in our faith and gain better understanding. As a community, we seek to walk together towards greater knowledge.

These two different models work very well for their respective communities – they allow scientists and people of faith to build truths. But when these two communities overlap, we have to decide how we're going to know. So, I'd like to submit a rule for knowing: when one is participating in a knowledge community, one must abide by that community's rules of knowing. And the key to this rule is the idea that one should not apply rules from one community to another.

In practical terms, this means that creationism has no place in science classrooms. In recent years, efforts have been made to introduce creationism and so-called "intelligent design" to public school classrooms. Proponents of creationism say that schools should "teach the controversy" – talk about alternatives to evolutionary theory. The problem with is that there is controversy. According to the scientific community, neither creationism nor "intelligent design" is a viable alternative to evolutionary theory. Using the scientific way of knowing, which is the method we teach in science classes, creationism does not rise to the appropriate level of thought. People are free to believe what they like in their churches, but if they insist on pushing their beliefs in the science classroom, they must be prepared to accept the verdict of scientists.

This is at the heart of my theory – communities should be allowed to define what Truth is and how we should get there. But these Truths aren't exclusive – this is not an either/or proposition.

Because these truths are provisional, or partial, we have to be able to employ multiple ways of knowing. It is helpful to think of these ways of knowing as tools in our toolbox. We should be able to identify what the correct tool is for particular investigations. I think that our cultural struggles over this issue stem from people using the wrong tools for the job. Creationists are attempting to use their religious way of knowing, which relies on scripture, to resolve a scientific question.

This was the problem with Thomas. Thomas was attempting to get at a Truth – the Truth of what happened to Jesus after his death. But he used the wrong tool, the wrong approach. He tried to conduct an empirical, scientific investigation into a question that is much more profound. The Truth of the resurrection has nothing to do with anything we can see – it is a metaphysical discovery. Thomas’ confession acknowledges this – “My Lord and my God” is not a hypothesis. The truth that Thomas discovers is what the king from Ecclesiastes was searching for. He too was using the wrong tools for the job. The difference is that he could admit this – he concludes that he was simply “chasing after wind.”

As a religious community, we have a shared Truth. Our Truth is essentially found in the confession of Thomas: Jesus is Lord. This Truth is, of course, provisional – as Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, we see “through a glass dimly.” But our Truth is not just about the nature of Jesus. It is also about His message – a message of radical inclusion, human dignity, and social justice. This is a truth that the world needs to hear. This is what science cannot give us. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Science has made the world a neighborhood, but it cannot make it a brotherhood.” That is what our Truth has to offer. And so I’d like to leave you with a challenge today: think about how we can share the Truth of our community, the message of Jesus our Lord, with a world in need of brotherhood.