

**“Believing Thomas”**

**John 20:19-31**

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**April, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

As I looked over today’s scripture reading, an experience I once had came to mind. There I sat, a 27-year-old with epilepsy at my last ever Pentecostal prayer meeting. For those of you who do not know, I used to belong to a Pentecostal church. I had not planned for this meeting to be my last with them. It just kind of happened that way. So, there I sat in a room filled with other young adults who were there to pray. The air was thick with anticipation, as it usually is at Pentecostal gatherings. Then, a well-respected woman in our church, who somewhere along the line had been deemed a prophet, stepped into the room. She said she had a word from God for some of us. Now, for those of you think this is all too weird, it is actually very exciting to have someone who will speak God’s word to you, so we all hoped she’d say something to us. She spoke many wonderful things over many of the young adults gathered there. But when she got to me, she said, “The reason that you still suffer from epilepsy is that you do not have enough faith. You believe more in the ailment than you do in your Lord.” I was crushed and humiliated. I wanted to cry and to shout out, “What else does God want from me, then? I trust him whether he heals me or not!” But instead, I held together whatever little dignity I had left until the end of the meeting, at which point, I walked out the doors of that church hiding my tears.

Looking back, I think that this story can teach us something about faith and doubt. I think that it really illustrates how easy it can be for people of faith to want evidence for what they believe. Our sensory experiences have a profound impact on what we believe. Just look at the disciples in today’s scripture reading! It’s crucial for them to be able to see and to hear and to

smell and to touch, which is why Thomas' desire to see Jesus for himself should come as no surprise to us. Our senses play a big role in our belief, and when we do not see or sense or touch or feel our faith, it can be exceedingly difficult to hold onto it. The woman who said that to me bore no ill will toward me. She simply had a difficult time reckoning the fact that I was living faithfully and still not seeing the miracle of healing in my life. In forming her theology of divine healing, she clearly had not considered today's passage. For in it, Jesus declares, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe,"

Before Jesus appeared to the disciples and breathed the Holy Spirit into them, they were locked away in an upper room, fearing for their lives. Sure, they had heard the testimony about the Risen Christ from the women who had found the empty tomb. But they didn't believe it. The only thing that they knew for sure was what they had seen and experienced. With their own eyes, they had seen the dead and brutalized body of their leader, the one who was supposed to overcome all of the powers of darkness in this world. Not only were they sorely disappointed. They were alone and confused and traumatized and sad, and they were pretty sure that they were going to be the next ones to meet the same fate as Jesus. Indeed, there was not a more dispirited and unhappy group of men in all the world. For they knew that they had failed Christ, miserably and unforgivably, and their consciences must have trembled within them, as their self-respect withered and died. But there was something far more terrifying than that, for from their view, Christ had failed them no less disastrously. His confident promises had proved to be no more than mere words, with no substance to back them up. That wonderful dream of the Reign of God that he had implanted in each of them had come to nothing, it had died on that cross with Jesus. They had believed with all of their hearts, but everything they thought they knew about Jesus turned out to be wrong. Certainly now, they didn't know what to believe or not to believe. So

they hid, like people with no faith and no hope. Weren't they supposed to be the faithful ones, the ones who Jesus hand-picked to follow him? Weren't they supposed to just believe and trust that God would work things out somehow? And yet there they were, holed up in a tiny upper room, panicking.

It is into this pathetic scene that Jesus appeared. Notice that when Jesus shows up, no one says to him, "Welcome back!" or "I knew it!" or even "What took you so long?" No, none of them foresaw Christ's return, and it is not until he shows them his wounds that they rejoice in seeing their risen Lord. Everybody in this story doubts. All of them. It seems to me that doubt was not the exception to the rule after Jesus' death. It was the norm. And what Jesus says to them and does for them next is even more unbelievable than his rising from the grave. Not only was he back from the dead, but he came bringing the disciples another chance to follow him. How welcome was Christ's startling peace in this moment of fear and downheartedness! What happy news that their Lord had not failed them after all. And he was ready to receive them in spite of their failures! In that moment, Jesus reclaims them. Despite the fact that they had abandoned him, he trusts them with his message. Despite the fact that they denied him, he calls them. The dream of the Reign of God is alive, and he leaves it unafraid in the hands of the disciples. To put it succinctly, Jesus says, "As the Father sent me, even so I send you." What amazing, unbelievable grace and trust! What the disciples thought they knew from experience had been trumped by a new experience of Jesus as risen and forgiving and trusting! A new reality had dawned for them!

But not for poor Thomas, for he missed out on meeting the Risen savior. How could he simply believe when his friends told him? He was still haunted by the image of his hopelessly marred and lifeless friend. He needed his own experience with the risen Lord. And so Thomas,

realistically and honestly tells his friends exactly what it will take for him to believe. He insists that he must see the risen Lord for himself, have the same experience that the rest of the disciples already had. And incredibly, Jesus works with Thomas' unbelief! He comes to Thomas offering all that Thomas has asked for. What a remarkable Lord. He does not come saying that the more faith we have the fewer questions we'll ask. He does not insist that Thomas must be sure of what he believes before he visits him. No. He simply comes showing us that faith and doubt are woven much closer together than we might imagine. He does not ask Thomas for blind faith, for it is only when the gospel is not some mere intellectual assent to what others say, but rather something we have proved through our experience, something that has happened to us- only then does our belief grow vital. Through Jesus' visit, faith happens to Thomas.

And though Thomas was slow starting out, he jumps to the head of the class, ascribing to Jesus the highest praise given in all the New Testament, as he cries, "My Lord and my God!" Most Bible scholars agree that this chapter is the original ending of John's gospel. As such, Thomas' exclamation is meant to be the apex and the culmination of the gospel of John. Indeed, Thomas has become the model disciple for generations to come, and the model of how one becomes a disciple.

So why, if Thomas is such a model of faith to us, does Jesus scold him at the end of this story? I'd like to assert here that when Jesus says "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," he is not chiding on Thomas for his unbelief. As a matter of fact, I don't even think that he's talking to Thomas anymore. Imagine with me, if you will that this is a scene in a movie. At one moment, Jesus is looking at Thomas and saying, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Then, he pauses, looks directly into the camera lens and proclaims, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." He is looking at you and

me, proclaiming a blessing over us to last for all time “Blessed are those who have not seen.” Yes, this blessing is aimed toward us, and to people all over the world and throughout all time who never had the chance to meet Jesus in the flesh. It’s aimed at people with the same doubts that Thomas had before he met with the risen Christ. It’s aimed at those of us who feel like evidence of God’s grace or even his existence is sparse. To those of us who feel that our prayers go unanswered, probably unheard. To those of us who pray for healing but never get it. To those who feel that their hearts have grown dull and cold. For those of us who wander in utter darkness and yet maintain some semblance of faith. It’s aimed at those of us who question God’s goodness as we see lives filled with heartache and pain and loss all around us. It’s meant for those of us who truly wonder whether any of our good deeds can ever make a difference in this cold world, who spend ourselves on thankless work, with no flicker of encouragement or results to justify it. Our Lord understands this, for he lived it. He’s the one who died without one single soul who truly understood him or believed. And he encourages us, saying blessed are we who have not seen.

And as the author, John, lays down his pen, we can imagine the narrator’s voice coming into our little movie scene and explaining the point of all of this: “I have written these things so that you might believe.” Here, near the end of his story, John comes clean -- this is no neutral account he's writing, no objective history. John carefully chooses each word, hoping that we, like Thomas, will be persuaded that Jesus is our lord and our God, that he is risen and calls us to live as resurrection people. And that the hope of the Reign of God is still at hand!

So perhaps on this second Sunday of Easter, we come to the gospel in darkness, with our own hang-ups and questions and issues and doubts. Perhaps we feel as if our alleluias are ringing a bit hollow this day. Maybe we come afraid that we have somehow failed in our faith,

doubting that there is any hope yet for us. Do not be dismayed! Jesus chooses us for what we are: children of God – fears, doubts, and all. You see, doubt is not the opposite of faith but rather it hones our faith! Hardboiled realism can be a major asset to having a vibrant faith, like Thomas'. When we bring our questions and skepticism, as well as our insights and trust, to our Christian lives, we follow in the footsteps of Thomas! Not allowing ourselves to stagnate in thinking that our understanding of God complete and completely right, but seeking answers. Doubt keeps our faith moving forward, growing, evolving, unfolding. Doubt makes our faith vibrant. And so we truly are the blessed ones who have not seen, and yet always find a way to exclaim, "My Lord and my God!"