



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

## The Blessing of “Unless” I John 3:1-3; John 20:19-31

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews makes an impressive case for the nature of faith. Toward the end of the epistle he begins a homily on faith with the often quoted words, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Assurance, hope, and things unseen are the essence of faith. We hope that God will do what has been promised and God assures us that things we cannot now see will take place. We are offered a litany of biblical characters who remained faithful despite their difficult circumstances and the fact that years and sometimes a lifetime passed without seeing the ultimate fulfillment of a promise God had made. I imagine the early disciples also felt like those Old Testament characters who were called by God to step out in faith into a future that was uncertain at best.

Of all times to challenge that perspective, we would least expect it to occur immediately after Jesus’ resurrection. Yet, John, for all of his theological refinement, chose the waiting disciples in a borrowed upper room to teach us something else about the character of faithfulness. Listen to this familiar story:

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.

John 20:19-31

"Doubting Thomas" is not included in the list of heroes of the faith along with folks like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, and the prophets. Yet, that does not mean that Thomas was not faithful. In fact, although Jesus mildly rebukes Thomas for not believing without seeing, he does not condemn him but invites him to believe. Like his friends, Thomas was grappling with the death of his friend and teacher and Savior. Like the others, he was hoping that the past three years weren't for naught. To me, Thomas brings a simple, almost childlike curiosity and quest for truth to this story. He is not "Doubting Thomas" as much as he is "Curious Thomas." Perhaps he had been led down this path before by one of the many charlatans who regularly sought to cash in on God's promises to his people. Maybe he desperately wanted to see Jesus again, but, being a practical man, thought that rumors of Jesus' resurrection were simply too good to be true.

Whatever the reason, Thomas was not going to take a report from anyone else that Jesus was alive. When Thomas missed Jesus' first appearance, he wanted to see him for himself—the same as you and I do today. Thomas brought a childlike curiosity to the group of believers huddled in that upper room grasping for assurance that what they hoped for would take place and what they could not see was right before their eyes. Earlier, Jesus had reminded his followers that "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Often, a child helps us to see what we otherwise might overlook.

You have no doubt seen the insurance company ad which shows a talking box making a presentation to a class of boys and girls on career day. The box explains that what he does is save people money on their car insurance. Clearly it is the intent of the box to impress the kids. When it is time for questions, however, the children will not ignore the obvious. They ask, “How do you go to the bathroom?”, “Do you have a girlfriend?”, and, something very important to children, “Where is your belly button?”<sup>1</sup> These are the things of interest when you have a talking box in front of you. These are the things that children (and probably adults) want to know.

For me, Thomas is the curious youngster who won't take anyone else's word for what is at stake nor will he let the rest of us get away with believing any old thing that comes along. He wants to see Jesus for himself. He wants to see and touch the places where Jesus hurt because he is hurting as well.

One of my cousins has a grandson who is about nine or ten years old. When he heard that my mother had died, he told his mother, “I have to go to that funeral because I have to check on Uncle Frank.” That young fellow cared and he wanted to touch the place where my father hurt so much. He had to see my dad for himself. He did come to my mother's funeral and he reached out and touched the woundedness of my father and of Christ.

“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” . . . “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The blessing of “unless” is that it links our deep need to know the ways of God with the innocently curious ways of children.

As a child, I asked questions all the time. I remember one occasion when I was peppering a neighbor with questions as he was trying to work in his yard that he yelled next door for my mother to retrieve me and give him some relief!

The sad reality is that, at points, we sometimes stop asking questions. We become tired or complacent or simply lazy and want someone else to figure things out for us. Yet, our faith, of all things, is far too important to give up searching it out. Thomas opened the door for the rest of us to actively

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<sup>1</sup>“Career Day,” *Progressive Insurance Ad* (January 22, 2017); available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HQemiAISGPg>.

engage in exploring our faith. He opened the door for God in Christ to show us the truth firsthand.

Last year around this time, Dean James Ryan of the Harvard Graduate School of Education delivered the graduation address for the students and their families. He explained that he had spoken twice before at graduation events and, when people began asking what his topic was for this occasion, he would reply, "That's a good question." Eventually he realized that a good speech would be one about good questions. Speaking to a class of folks who had prepared for years to enter the field of education, he reminded them that they no doubt felt like they had all the answers. He reminded them, however, that in order to find the right answers, you have to ask the right questions. He offered five questions that are good for us to ask in life.<sup>2</sup> At some point I intend to preach on all of these good questions, but today I want to offer the first one which I think is what Thomas was getting at with his insistence that unless he saw and touched Jesus' wounds, he would not believe.

Dean Ryan's first question is "Wait, what?" It is, he said, a question his children would often ask when he told them to do a chore around the house. "Please stop playing that video game and take out the garbage." "Wait, what?"

When I was young, our family used to drive all night to Florida to visit my maternal grandmother and several sets of aunts, uncles, and cousins. On one occasion, about nine of us cousins had been left with my grandmother. We had all been rowdy and Grandma was at her wit's end when my uncle came to pick up his crew. Apparently my cousin Butch had done something to really upset Grandma and my uncle promptly took him into the bathroom to offer a corrective spanking. In a few moments, however, they both came out laughing. What happened is that when they got into the bathroom, my cousin looked at his dad and said, "Now, Bill, let's talk about this thing." "Wait!, what?" can be a helpful place to start.

"Wait, what?" is Thomas' question. It is the question of curiosity. It is pressing the pause button in order to get a clearer understanding of what is going on around us. Thomas was still reeling from Jesus' death but his friends were telling him that Jesus was alive. Wait, what? I have to see this for myself. Asking for clarification and further information is the first step in

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<sup>2</sup>James Ryan, "Good Questions," 2016 Harvard Graduate School of Education Presentation of Diplomas and Certificates (May 26, 2016); available online at: [gse.harvard.edu](http://gse.harvard.edu).

understanding what is going on around us. It is a good question to ask of our faith.

The resurrection of Jesus is far too important for us to merely take a sideways glance once a year and then go on about our business. It is the bedrock of our faith, the basis of our hope, the foundation of our living. Granted, we do not have the luxury of Jesus dropping by to hold out his hands, but we do have benefit of the witness of believers through the centuries and the experiences of the people sitting around us to help us believe that Jesus rose from the dead and offers us eternal life as well.

Deborah and I missed being with you last week. It was odd not being in worship on Easter morning. There were lots of emotions and questions swirling around as we waited for word that my father was okay and able to go home. Many of you sent messages which meant the world to us. Randy Stewart offered this encouragement:

While events of this nature serve as a stark reminder of our human frailties, they also magnify the true reason we celebrate the resurrection. Our God, the most loving and nurturing of all parents, through the sacrifice of His Son, has assured the eternal life to which your blessed Mother may now lay claim.

Like many of you, Randy and Nancy have experienced the deaths of both parents and the ongoing illness of their daughter. Like you, they have seen and touched Jesus' wounds. Through your experiences and faith, I have seen, too, and believed.

Another thing that happened on Easter afternoon will never leave me. We arrived home late in the morning and set about to get my father settled and sort things out. When it was time for lunch, my dad wanted a hot dog and my brother told me that the little convenience store not far from the house had the best hot dogs in town. When we walked in, a blond-haired fellow greeted us and then looked closely and asked my name. He was older but we had gone to church together and I knew his parents and brother and sister well. As he filled our order, we caught up on news. When I stepped up to pay, he said, "The hot dogs are on me. They are my gift to the family. It's not much but it is what I can do."

That spirit, so childlike in some ways, is what makes life so good. He offered what he had and it was exactly what we needed at the time. “Wait, what? Here is what I have to offer.”

“Unless I see and touch, I will not believe.” “Unless you become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. The blessing of “unless” is that our need to know for ourselves is serviced by the natural curiosity given to us early on to explore the things that matter in life. Our children remind us of these things daily. Thomas is the poster child for a life of “faith seeking understanding.”

Thomas was right to speak up and ask for what he needed for his faith. The blessing of “unless” is that as children of God we are invited to dive into our faith, explore all of its nooks and crannies, and discover the life-giving treasures God has given to us. Unless you seek, you will never find. Thanks be to God. Amen.

April 23, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is with joy and excitement that we gather today to proclaim once again that Christ is risen from the dead and has offered us eternal life in your kingdom, O Lord. It is with humility and gratitude that we acknowledge the pain and sacrifice he endured on our behalf and with reverence that we receive anew the love you have offered us through him. We celebrate life that is redeemed and new and filled with hope.

We seek to rely upon you more in the living of our days. We call upon you in tragedy and fear, but look for you so seldom in the familiar activities of each day. Our lives are a series of schedules, and we, at times, lose control. We pray that we might find you in the busyness of our days in order to bring about some sense of meaning and purpose to the things we do. Grant us each day a time of stillness when we might become aware of your presence in our lives and call upon you for guidance. Let us not forget you, O God, lest we fail to remember the source and sustenance of life itself.

It is in the difficult days that we sometimes sense you closest to us, O Lord. Problems, illnesses, grief, fear, confusion all threaten to push us away from you, but you care for us through all of our troublesome days. We pray for one another, for our particular needs, for help through the difficulties of this day. We ask for health for those who are ill, for support for those who are weak and unsteady, for direction in times of uncertainty, and for comfort in times of grief. We pray for lives lost in tragedies that we do not understand. For innocents slain by unstable minds, for lives lost to war and the hostilities we direct at one another, for people killed by unexplained disaster, for lives that could have been preserved to serve you and your world, we offer our prayers. Bless those who grieve for their loss and bless those who further loss may prevent. Manifest yourself to us all, O God, in our time of need.

Teach us to listen for you, O God, and speak to us in your still, small voice that we might draw apart from our schedules into the light and peace of your presence. Bless us as we continue to experience Easter every day through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.