

Believing Without Seeing

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- John 20:19-29 Good News Translation ¹⁹ It was late that Sunday evening, and the disciples were gathered together behind locked doors, because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities. Then Jesus came and stood among them. "Peace be with you," he said. ²⁰ After saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you." ²² Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." ²⁴ One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (called the Twin), was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe." ²⁶ A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. The doors were locked, but Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!" ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!"

You've probably heard the term "a doubting Thomas." It's used to suggest that a person tends not to believe what he or she is told. Maybe you didn't realize that the term "doubting Thomas" comes from the Bible, specifically from these stories from the second-to-last chapter of the Gospel of John.

To this day, Thomas is still held up as a person whose faith wasn't as strong as it should have been. He's looked down upon because he had some doubts when his spiritual brothers told him that they had actually seen Jesus – alive and talking with them!

I don't think it's fair to saddle Thomas with that label of "doubting Thomas," and there are a few reasons why.

First there's the linguistic reason. John wrote his gospel in the Greek language, and in the Greek text the Greek word for "doubt" doesn't appear. Jesus doesn't call Thomas a "doubter." The Greek words have Jesus urging Thomas to be a believer, not an unbeliever.

A second reason Thomas doesn't deserve to be remembered as "doubting Thomas" is this: Thomas wasn't alone in being an unbeliever. In the verses just before today's Bible passage Jesus instructed Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples that he was rising from the tomb for a reunion with his Heavenly Father. And that's what she did: Mary "told the disciples that she had seen the Lord and related to them what he had told her" (v. 18).

Now, did the disciples doubt her? Reading John's gospel it's hard to say. But the other gospels say it: Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that when the disciples were told the news that Jesus had been raised from death to life they didn't believe it. So why single out a "doubting Thomas"? Why not also a "doubting Peter" and "doubting Andrew" and "doubting Thaddeus" and so on?

The reason is that the writer of the Fourth Gospel uses the figure of Thomas the apostle to communicate a truth to the audience he was writing for. Remember, the gospels weren't written so they could be in the Bible. They were written by particular authors writing for

particular communities. For instance, I'm writing for an audience of 21st century Presbyterians living near the shore of Lake Erie. John the Evangelist was writing for a particular audience, too.

Who was John writing for? We don't know where they were located, but Bible scholars are sure that John was part of a community of Jewish people who embraced faith in God through Jesus Christ the Son – we can think of them as “Christian Jews.”

John wrote his gospel for those Christian Jews sometime between the years 75-100 AD. By then between forty and seventy years had passed since the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Many of those Christian Jews in John's community had been born after the time of Christ. Many of those early Christian believers weren't acquainted with anyone who had been an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

And so those early Christians wondered: could their faith possibly be as legitimate, as rooted, as life-changing as the faith of those who had been so fortunate as to have seen and heard and known Jesus? To address their concern John the gospel writer described a scene on the evening of that first Easter.

Disciples of Jesus were gathered in a room; in addition to the Twelve it very well could have included other followers. And of course, the Twelve were now “ten”: Judas had died, and the disciple named Thomas wasn't there for some reason. Despite walls and locked doors the Risen Christ suddenly appeared in their midst and showed them the wounds in his hands and side of his physical body.

Let's remember: Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene early that morning, but this was the first time he appeared to his disciples. After a while Jesus left them. Sometime later Thomas joined the group. The others were beside themselves. They excitedly declared, “We have seen the Lord!”

Had Thomas been there earlier that day when Mary Magdalene told the disciples that *she* had seen the Lord? Is this the first he was hearing of it? Thomas shakes his head. “I'll believe it—I'll believe you—when I can put my fingers in the scars of his hands and side.”

A week goes by. We don't know what happened during that time. But the following Sunday night the group gathered again; this time Thomas was with them.

Jesus comes into their midst again. As if he had eavesdropped after he had departed the week before, Jesus immediately speaks to Thomas. He tells Thomas to place his fingers in the wounds of his hands and side. Thomas doesn't need to; in a clear and concise declaration of faith Thomas exclaims, “My Lord and My God!”

John's gospel concludes the episode with Jesus affirming that faith isn't dependent on proof: “Do you believe because you see me? How [blessed, how] happy are those who believe without seeing me!”¹

John the gospel writer had Jesus speak that assurance to Thomas, but the Evangelist wrote those words with his faith community of Christian Jews in mind. He assured them that they could fully embrace their trust in the Son of God even though they themselves had not had a personal experience with Jesus of Nazareth. “How happy are those who believe without seeing me!”

The message John's gospel conveyed to that community long ago applies to our lives, too. We're separated from the earthly ministry of Jesus not by decades but by centuries... and by distance... and by culture. But thanks to the inspiring, faithful testimony of ancient people in distant lands, our trust in God through the revelation of Jesus Christ can be as assuring as the faith of the earliest generations of believers. Jesus himself promised it: “How happy are those who believe without seeing me!”

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¹ John 20:29 Good News Translation