

An empty tomb and discarded burial cloths. Simple things that could mean nothing or everything, that could be the source of despair or hope. On that fateful morning, two men ran to see what this might mean. After arriving at the tomb, Simon Peter went in first but did not know what to believe. Then, the Beloved Disciple went in and believed. What is it that set these two men apart? Why is it that one man could look at these things and see nothing while the other stared at them and believed?

If we wanted, we could take the same journey that these men took. We could go to visit Jerusalem and enter the Holy Sepulcher to visit the empty tomb. We could go to Turin and visit the Shroud to see the miraculous image of Christ's Passion. We could go to Manoppello to see the cloth that covered Christ's face in the tomb and its miraculous image of His face. We could go and see these things, and yet the results would be the same as that first Easter morning. Some of us would walk away in disbelief while others would walk away with belief.

The same could be said of our church today. While we are all here, some want to be here while others do not. Some here believe while others do not. I do not say this to condemn or to cause division, but to merely point out the truth faced by many of our families today. As on that first Easter morning, some of us have been moved to faith by the empty tomb while others have not.

This is nothing new because from the very beginning Jesus brought about division in those He encountered. Some would hear His words and believe while others would hear His words and scoff. As C. S. Lewis once said in his book "Mere Christianity," Jesus was either a Liar, a Lunatic, or the Lord. While you could argue that there are other options, we cannot argue that the Scriptures clearly show that people understood exactly what Jesus was saying and they reacted to Him with either hatred or terror or adoration.

This is highlighted by His teaching that “the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day” (Lk 24:7). This definitely made Jesus sound like a Liar or a Lunatic, but after the experience of Easter many of His followers came to see in this prediction proof that He was Lord. They believed this even though there were many around them who did not believe... even though there were many around them who wanted to kill them for their beliefs. They gladly offered their lives to proclaim to everyone that Jesus truly was the Lord.

Today’s Gospel gives us a small clue to what sets those who believe apart from those who do not. Recall that Peter walked away from the empty tomb confused while the Beloved Disciple believed. In this account, John deliberately refers to himself as the “Beloved Disciple” so that he can become replaced as a symbol. The Beloved Disciple stands for all those who love Jesus... all those who are loved by Jesus. In other words, the Beloved Disciple stands for you and me.

This teaches us that, in the end, the one who can see the empty tomb and the discarded burial cloths and be moved to belief is the one who loves Jesus. If we do not love Jesus and have a relationship with Him, then no proof will ever be great enough to make us believe that He is the Son of God. If we love Jesus, however, then the signs that God gives us in this life will prove that He is the Lord.

This is problematic though because it seems to imply that if we don’t already love God... or love Him enough... then we will never be able to overcome our doubts. And yet, this wasn’t true for Peter and John. Although both walked away from that empty tomb divided in belief, they ended their lives united in faith. This is because they were both able to experience the Risen Christ in their lives. It is the experience of the Risen Christ in our lives that overcomes our doubts and allows us to love Christ and believe in His promises.

In the end, we will all face doubts but we do not have to be defined by them. Think back to the story of doubting Thomas. Thomas was told by his friends that Christ had risen from the dead. He wanted to believe, and yet he still had doubts. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe” (Jn 20:25). Jesus wanted to overcome these doubts so He appeared to Thomas and invited Thomas to touch His wounded flesh. Seeing Jesus, Thomas exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

If we want to overcome our doubts and come to belief, then we must encounter Christ. This does not mean, however, that we must go to special places to encounter the Risen Christ. We don't have to journey to Jerusalem to see the empty tomb or go to Turin to see the Shroud or go to Manoppello to see the face cloth. We can encounter the Risen Christ wherever we are by simply calling upon Him in our need. We can encounter Him in the face of a stranger or loved one... in the beauty of nature... in the presence of the Eucharist. Wherever we are, Jesus can be present there with us. As Jesus said elsewhere in Scripture, “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20).

If we are already like the Beloved Disciple, then the invitation today is to deepen our faith and live it out more powerfully in our lives. If we are like Peter or Thomas, then the invitation is to call upon God and ask Him to prove that He is not a Liar. No matter who we are, no matter the reason that we have come here today, God wants all of us to walk away from His empty tomb with belief. This will only happen, however, if we call upon Him and ask Him to make Himself present in our lives. If we do this and He truly is the Lord, not a Liar, then He will respond to our call and give us proofs of His love. In that moment of encounter with our Risen Lord, we will have to make a choice. Do we still choose to walk away in doubt or do we instead choose to finally cry out in belief, “My Lord and my God!”