

**“Believing Thomas”**  
Second Sunday of Easter  
April 8, 2018  
John 20: 19-31  
Rev. Sarah Carbajal

Ever since the Christmas season, my son Lelin (recently turned 4) has been on the alert for a Jesus sighting. Every Santa he saw he hoped was Jesus. “Mom, look—it’s Jesus!” he would say as we drove around looking at yards with Santa cut outs and lights. Then after reading the Christmas story in his toddler bible and coming to Sunday school, he didn’t see or hear a baby without getting his hopes up. If you asked Lelin, “Who is coming on Christmas Eve?” you would have undoubtedly heard one answer: “baby Jesus.” I had tried to prepare him for the fact that he would not get to see baby Jesus with his eyes on Christmas, but during the candlelight service on Dec. 24<sup>th</sup> he heard a baby coo and cry a little near the end of the singing and he leaned over and said in my ear: “Mommy...I told you, Jesus IS here.”

Now he regularly asks me—“Mommy, when will I see Jesus?” We have been telling him that Jesus is in heaven with God but is all around us and is always with us—even though we don’t always see him with our eyes. I tell him that he will learn to see Jesus in many different ways as he grows. At Sunday school he has learned that Jesus loves him and is in his heart. So no wonder when we went to our pediatrician last week and she held up the stethoscope to Lelin the following dialogue occurred:  
“Lelin, when I put this on your heart and listen, what am I going to hear?”  
My son thought for a second and confidently proclaimed, “Jesus!”  
I had to explain that one a little!

I tell you all this because faith in Christ rests in growing into the awareness of the living Christ in and around us. My son will need to come to experience the presence of Christ in his own life and come to recognize Christ in the world and in the body of Christ—the church. To become a disciple, he will need to see Jesus for himself. We all do.

This second Sunday in Easter is a continuation of our celebration that the tomb was empty that Easter morning over 2000 years ago, but also that that the One that rose from the dead, leaving burial clothes behind, does seek and find us that we may know Him and come to believe that God is with us and is redeeming this world.

Our Gospel story this morning begins with a group of fearful and stagnant disciples of Jesus. They are all behind locked doors because now that Jesus has been executed on the cross, they fear the religious leaders may come after them too. Mary Magdalene has already told them that she has seen Jesus that morning near the tomb, and Peter and another disciple have seen the empty tomb, but that has not relieved the group's apprehension, confusion, or doubts. That evening, Jesus does not let their uncertainty, fear, or the laws of physics deter him from coming alongside them. I imagine that Jesus must have enjoyed the looks on their faces when he steps in to the house by coming THROUGH it. They are overwhelmed and overjoyed to see him standing there, ushering words of peace and showing them his hands and his side where he had been nailed and punctured. After seeing Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit from Jesus, they come to faith in the risen Christ.

But there is just one problem. One of Jesus' core followers, one of the original 12 is absent—Thomas.

The scripture doesn't tell us where he was or why he wasn't with the group. If you look back in the book of John you will discover that this wasn't the first time Thomas found himself standing apart from the rest of the disciples. In John 11, Jesus says to the disciples "Let us go to Judea again" and the disciples said "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus was set on returning to tend to his friend Lazarus who had died there, but all of the disciples, save one, tried to talk him out of it. Thomas, who had been listening all this time, finally spoke up: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas had calculated the risk of following Jesus back to the home of Lazarus like his friends—and his calculation was certainly pessimistic, but he put his trust and fate at the side of Jesus. If this trip was truly to be Jesus' last, then it would be Thomas' last too.

Let's forward to chapter 13 and 14. Jesus has been preparing the disciples for the fact that he would be leaving them but would return. He has explained that they cannot follow him where he is going in the present (speaking of his death), but that they will be able to follow him afterward. Peter wants to know why he can't follow and says he will give up his life for Jesus, but Jesus pushes back and tells Peter that he will deny him 3 times before the next morning. Jesus assures his disciples that he will go and prepare and place for them and would return to take them there himself. Jesus assures them that they know the way to where he is going, but Thomas is concerned.

He has been following Jesus a long time...but how will he follow now that Jesus is talking about going somewhere he doesn't understand? In response to Thomas' concern and question, Jesus says "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one come to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Now let's return to our text for today. Thomas is off by himself. Based on all that follows, I cannot imagine that these words of Jesus were not on his mind. Where was Jesus who promised to come back himself and bring them to where he was going? Thomas already knew that following Jesus was risky and had no illusions about the condition of the world, but having his Lord die on a cross was even a bit much for him. His problem seems to me was that he was lost. He had lost his compass...his true north. His Lord. Where was Jesus and what was going on?

And then his comrades come running to him declaring that they had seen the Lord.

Thomas has been unfairly dubbed in church history as "Doubting Thomas" because of his obstinate refusal to take his friends at their word. He meets their excited report with a rebuttal: "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."

Yes, it's true that Thomas made a high demand. It may even be true that Thomas was particularly stubborn and hard headed. I know a few people like this. But no matter how you want to characterize him, you have to imagine his confusion and frustration. Perhaps even anger. While he was not hiding behind locked doors and cowering in fear, Jesus appeared to the rest of the group? Perhaps he thought they had worked themselves up into a state a delirium and were now seeing what they wanted to see. Perhaps he was a little jealous? Or perhaps he took Jesus as his word and was not going to settle for any less than an encounter with Jesus, who promised to return himself and show him where he was going.

No matter how you look at it, Thomas is no uncomplicated man...and his faith demands, generally coined "doubt," in a negative since, are full of passion and conviction...the kind of passion and conviction that faith is built upon.

What is most noteworthy and interesting to me in the passage that follows is not that Thomas initially demonstrates doubt. ALL of the disciples including

Mary Magdalene showed evidence of doubt. We do not label them “Doubting Mary, Doubting Phillip...” In fact, none of the apostles are labeled by the church for their weaknesses. Peter could easily be called “Rebuking Peter” or “Denying Peter”—but Christian tradition calls him “the Rock” as Jesus did.

No, what is noteworthy and interesting to me here is Jesus. Note that Jesus responds to Thomas with steadfast love and grace. Jesus knows what Thomas needs. Jesus knows the bold and dedicated character of Thomas. Jesus knows that Thomas is one that will serve and follow his mater, even to his own peril. Jesus knows Thomas. Jesus LOVES and CHOSE Thomas—stubbornness and all!

He meets Thomas where Thomas is.

While Thomas seems to demand physical contact with Jesus in order to believe, the text never specifies whether Thomas actually does touch Jesus or not. In fact, by not including that detail, we are left with a real possibility that Thomas came to belief apart from his own demands...though there is no question that Jesus would have allowed his touch.

Like Mary, who saw the Lord clearly when he said her name, Thomas sees Jesus clearly when he repeats the very words Thomas has spoken to his comrades and stands before him full of life and grace—calling him to abandon unbelief in exchange for belief.

In response to Jesus, Thomas utters the loftiest confession of faith in the Gospel of John: “My Lord and my God!” This is synonymous with a common reference to God in Hebrew: *Yahweh Elohim*—“Lord God” Thomas is not just declaring that he believes Jesus is alive or that Jesus is God’s son. Thomas is declaring that in seeing Jesus he is seeing the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, the one and only true God. Recall John 14:7, spoken to Thomas in the presence of all the disciples: “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

In seeing Jesus, Thomas moves from a place of despair, confusion, and doubt to true believing. He truly sees Jesus, and in seeing Jesus, his testimony is that he sees God the Father. Jesus and God are one. Jesus is his Lord and his God.

Next, Jesus acknowledges Thomas’s faith and then says words that the gospel of John records primarily for our benefit. “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Here Jesus is pushing his disciple to grow into a faith that would have to adapt to being guided by the Holy Spirit, not Jesus' physical presence as the disciples are accustomed to, but he is also assuring *us*, the readers of this gospel, that faith in Christ is fully possible for all generations to come without the requirement of seeing Jesus before he ascended. Jesus promises us that he has made sure that each of us can come to see and know the Father in Jesus without seeing him in the flesh. In other words, Jesus entered human history for all of history. We are assured of our ability to see Christ due to the power of Jesus' own Holy Spirit working through the testimonies of those first believers and God's Word, and Christ's continuing presence in the world through the Spirit and through His new body—his followers—the church.

Let me give you an example. My dear friend Charlene and I grew up together right here in Nacogdoches. She is now an optometrist and works in Longview, and she and her husband and baby visit AHBC when they can. She had a patient who came to see her a few years ago with all kinds of eye problems. (I am not a doctor, so I admit that I don't remember the names of all her conditions and symptoms, but I am a pastor, so I remember the other details of the story). My friend worked hard to diagnose and treat this woman, who was very poor and had not received much eye care in the past. During a follow up appointment many weeks later, Charlene asked her patient, "How is your vision now?" Her patient exclaimed, "Dr., You've really done it! Now I see Jesus!"

Taken by surprise, and not sure what to think, my friend asked for a little clarification. For years, her patient had been attending a church with an image of Jesus posted at the front of the sanctuary. For years, she could not make out the image from her seat. After receiving the persistent and loving care of my friend, she went to church and was overwhelmed to discover that she could see Jesus. She was overjoyed!

For this woman, seeing Jesus was not just a matter of being able to make out the image of Jesus posted on a wall. No, Jesus became manifest and present when she received the love and care of Christ by someone who viewed her as a person, worthy of care and dignity—this was the love of Christ that made seeing Jesus possible.

Thomas' testimony was and is that Jesus Christ is God. Thomas' doubt in Jesus' resurrection lasted mere days...his believing lasted the rest of his lifetime. Tradition holds that Thomas took that gospel message from Parthia, to Persia and as far as India, and died a martyr, never letting go of his belief.

Believing Thomas gives us one of the greatest confessions in church history, a testimony that helps to build our faith today. As Kyle mentioned last week, there is nothing natural about the resurrection—such a thing is unknown territory. Doubt and confusion surrounding someone rising from the dead is natural. If we are going to allow church history to label Thomas “Doubting Thomas,” then we better put that description before the name of every saint and Christ follower to ever live—including each of us. Doubt is part of every course and journey of faith. But the miracle of faith is manifest in the testimonies of those doubters like Peter, Matthew, and Thomas that met the risen Christ and believed and is possible because of the relentless work of an ever-living and ever seeking God made known to us in Jesus.

My prayer for all of us is the prayer that my son requests every night and knows by heart...the one written by Pastor Kyle in the front of the book he was given at his child dedication:

“My prayer for you is that you know God loves you and will always be with you. In turn, may you show that same love with others.”

This is what Thomas believed. This is what Thomas lived.  
May it be so for us.

Amen.