

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Second Sunday of Easter (2021)

Never Seeing, Never Hearing, Never Understanding

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“Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”” (John 20:29, ESV)

When I planned for this Sunday’s sermon, I had decided to preach on the Epistle Reading for today, 1 John 5:4-10. But I had a conversation this past week with a modern-day Thomasina and this caused me to change my mind and preach instead on the Gospel Reading for today, specifically verse 29. Therein Jesus says to St. Thomas, ***“Have you believed because you have seen me?”*** which is truly a rhetorical question, because obviously seeing Jesus standing in front of him was the reason St. Thomas believed that our Lord had risen from the grave.

In recounting the story of St. Thomas’ unbelief, St. John tells us that he was not present that first evening when Jesus rose from the grave and revealed Himself to His apostles. Where he was and why he was not present with the other apostles is left to our imagination, the fact is, he was not there. Now, when the others tell him that they had seen Jesus risen from the grave, St. Thomas refused to believe, saying, ***“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”*** (John 20:25, ESV) It didn’t matter how adamant the others were, it didn’t matter how sincere their testimony was, St. Thomas was not going to believe. His human reason overcame his faith.

Now St. Thomas should have known better, but obstinately he continues to go through the week refusing to believe, unaffected by his fellow apostles’ testimonies. Then, as the Gospel Reading for today tells us, on the first day of the second week of our Lord’s resurrection, St. Thomas is with the others, in that upper room, and Jesus appears. What a shock this was for Thomas. This cannot be! How is this possible? I know that Jesus died on the cross, I know that He was nailed to that cursed tree, I know that a soldier speared His side. He died! How can this be? How can He be standing in front of me? This can’t be! This reality shocked his reason.

Poor Thomas, he was living proof of the words of Jesus quoted from Isaiah 6:9, saying, ***“seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”*** (Matthew 13:13, ESV) Sounds like so many today who although they see and hear God’s Word, refuse to believe what they see or what they hear and when it is presented to them or it is read to them, they refuse to understand. This is not ignorance; this is stubborn unbelief.

These modern-day Thomasina’s, when hearing the Word of God in all its truth and purity, say, “I refuse to believe that.” Even after being shown the Word of God, which so clearly reveals God’s truth, they still say, “Don’t confuse me with facts, I believe what I believe and no matter how much Scripture you show me, I’ll not believe what it says.” What did Jesus say? Let’s remind ourselves again, ***“seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.”*** (Matthew 13:13, ESV) They do not see, hear, or understand because their hearts are hardened (Mark 6:52). Shockingly, throughout what is loosely called the Christian church, there are so many who see and hear the Word of God yet refuse to believe what they see and hear. When it comes to faith, human reason is a powerful enemy against the Word of God.

These Thomasina's, like Zwingli, try to parse the word "is" to mean something other than what it means. If I, in introducing my wife say, "this is my wife," can I mean something else? Am I speaking symbolically or metaphorically? No, when I say "this is my wife" I mean this woman to whom I am introducing you is my wife, not something or someone else. Yet when Jesus on the last night of His life takes bread and says to His apostles, ***"Take, eat; this is my body."*** (Matthew 26:26, ESV) and then takes a cup of wine and says, ***"Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*** (Matthew 26:26, 27–28, ESV) these Thomasina's refuse to believe "is" means "is". Clearly, Jesus is saying that when you eat the consecrated bread, you are also eating His body, and when you drink the consecrated wine, you are also drinking His blood. Yet they ask, "how can this be?" How can bread become flesh and how can wine become blood. The answer, which stands before their very eyes, evades them, they cannot see. Christ speaks this miracle into being just as He spoke Creation into being. This is the resurrected One who is able to do all things. If the Word can create the world, why can't the Word make bread flesh and wine blood. Focusing on the "how" blocks their understanding of the "why," for the forgiveness of sins.

Those who refuse to believe God's Word do not limit their unbelief only to the holy Eucharist. Their unbelief also carries over to the sacraments of Baptism, Absolution, and the gift of faith.

For these modern-day Thomasina's Baptism is not the work of God, but their work, their doing, their decision. Literally, they turn Baptism into a Law, applying all manner of man-made requirements and restrictions. Thereby, the blessings of Baptism are lost to these doers of the Law. Failing to understand the Gospel blessings of Baptism, these would-be Pharisees reject infant baptism. For them faith must precede Baptism, and they confess that a child cannot have faith, therefore Baptism of infants is useless.

But I must ask these unbelievers, have you not heard the Word of God which says, ***"Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother's breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother's womb you have been my God."*** (Psalm 22:9–10, ESV) Or have you not heard the words of Jesus, who said, ***"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."*** (Luke 18:16, ESV)

In the covenant of circumcision, God said to Abraham, ***"He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,"*** (Genesis 17:12, ESV) Circumcision was God's outward mark, a sign of salvation, identifying a man as a child of God's covenant of circumcision. But this covenant ended with Christ, who is the Founder and Head of a new covenant. A covenant with a new, distinguishing sign, water with the Word of God.

In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus said, ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*** Again He said, ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."*** (John 3:3, 5–6, ESV) Notice, Jesus does not say, he who has faith must be born again with water and the Spirit. Christians are made children of God through the covenant of Baptism. Furthermore, St. Paul tells us we are circumcised not made with hands, but in Christ, through Baptism. He said, ***"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith."*** (Colossians 2:11–12, ESV) Baptism replaces circumcision. And just like circumcision, which was a means of grace for Hebrew infants and adults, Baptism

is a means of grace for Christian infants and adults. All that is done in Baptism is God's work, not the work of man.

Again, St. Paul reminds us of the efficacy of Baptism, saying, ***“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:3–4, ESV)*** Again, no limitations on age, sex, ethnicity, etc. Furthermore, ***“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV)*** Anyone, including the newest born child, is made a new creation in the waters of Baptism. They are made children of God. Furthermore, God says that He saves us, ***“not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:5–7, ESV)*** And St. Peter on that first Pentecost said to the crowd in Jerusalem, ***“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” (Acts 2:38–39, ESV)***

Look at what Baptism does for the sinner, including babies who are born with the stain of original sin. Baptism cleanses from all sin, including original sin, rescues from sin, death, and the devil, gives eternal salvation to all who believe, robes one in the righteousness of Christ, and makes one a child of God. Do these blessings sound like the work of man? Can man provide such blessings? No. Those who deny infants the blessings of Baptism are guilty of denying them these blessings from God and thus fall under the condemnation of Jesus when He said, ***“whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6, ESV)*** This is a terrible rebuke for those who refuse to Baptize babies. Moreover, failure to recognize the Scriptural efficacy of Baptism comes at a great price, the price of true faith, the fact that Christ is of no value to you for you are not baptized into His death.

The false understandings of these modern-day Thomasina's extend beyond the Sacraments. It permeates all their thinking regarding the gracious work of God to man through the Gospel. God's saving work is rejected in favor of their understanding that man must save himself in one fashion or another. If it is not outright Pelagianism, where man saves himself, it is a close cousin, a synergistic belief system where man begins the process of salvation, and God completes (Semi-Pelagianism) or where God begins the process of salvation, and man completes (Synergism). It matters not which one, they all through their false teachings confuse and denigrate the Gospel. Turning the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins into Law. Each of these belief systems have been soundly rebuked by the Church since its earliest days. Belief systems such as these deny God His glory in the salvation of men and assigns it instead to man. Man making the decision and saving himself, thereby denying the work of the Holy Spirit. All of this reminds us of when Jesus said, ***“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition . . . thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.” (Mark 7:9, 13, ESV)***

Oh that they would listen to St. Paul, who said, ***“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:8, ESV)***

Never Seeing, Never Hearing, Never Understanding, is a certain formula for eternal death. Jesus said, **“Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” (John 8:47, ESV)** Those who claim they are of God, yet reject His clear Word regarding His means of grace, secure in the misunderstanding of their forefathers or their modern thinking, walk on the edge of damnation.

But not all is lost for these Thomasina’s. Like St. Thomas they can be saved from their unbelief. Oh, not that Jesus would physically stand in their presence, for that meeting may be too late. But rather, we pray, that the Holy Spirit, who works only through Word and Sacraments, would come and stand in their face, open their eyes, unclog their ears, and melt their hardened hearts, so they would come to trust and thus come to a true understanding of God’s saving Word of the Gospel. Understanding that they cannot put limits on the Gospel, turning it into Law. Becoming Pharisees and adding a new Torah to the Gospel. But rather that they would come to a right understanding that God’s gracious act of salvation is not because of them, but solely because of His Son, Jesus Christ, whose death upon the Altar of the Cross opened God’s heart to forgive all men.

How much more satisfying is it to know that we’re not the ones responsible for our faith in Jesus. It was not our decision, but the Holy Spirit who brought us to faith through hearing the Word of the Gospel (Rom. 10:17). How wonderful to know that it is not our work which saves, but only the work of Christ Jesus. St. Paul makes it clear; from birth we are dead in our sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1) Dead men don’t make decisions. Then, St. Paul shows us how we were brought to faith, saying, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV)** All glory goes to God, none to us. If you think you can save yourself, you are to be pitied more than any man. Salvation is not by our effort. If it were, none of us could be saved because we are first and foremost sinners. Frail and corrupt human beings unable to live according to God’s commands and in need of God merciful grace.

God’s greatest desire is to forgive our sins. So great is His desire that it cost the life of His only begotten Son upon the Altar of the Cross. Our salvation was purchased by the blood of Christ. But our knowledge of this saving truth comes only through the Gospel, the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ. Wherever Scripture shows us forgiveness, it shows it in the Gospel, in God’s Means of Grace, the Word of the Gospel, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution. This is the truth of Holy Scripture; this is the truth of the Gospel.

I must admit there are times when my frustration makes me want to cry out like St. Paul and desire to depart and be with Christ, but then, like St. Paul, I am reminded, **“But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.” (Philippians 1:24, ESV)** Thus, **“we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13, ESV)** That Word is now at work in you giving you sight, for which Jesus says, **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

Thank God the Holy Spirit is at work in you enhancing your hearing that you are brought to an understanding of God’s gracious work and will in you through His dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ. So don’t be a Thomasina but be a believing St. Thomas who was brought to faith after reason had taken him captive. Although you have not physically seen the resurrected Christ as did St. Thomas, you have seen Him revealed before you through the Gospel of Holy Scripture and you can say with St. Thomas, **“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28, ESV)** Be a new St. Thomas, *Ever Seeing, Ever Hearing, and Ever Understanding*. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.