

“Blessed Are Those Who Have Not Seen But Believed”

Date: April 19, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 Peter 1:3-9

Occasion: Easter 2, Year A

Theme: Faith, Doubt

It seems kind of odd, but every year on the Sunday after Easter, we look at the story of “Doubting Thomas.” One week after the biggest Christian celebration of the year, and we deal with the subject of uncertainty and skepticism.

I really appreciate the fact that the Bible is so realistic about dealing with doubt, because frankly, we’ve all got it, or had it, at one point in our lives or another. Actually there are several places where the disciples themselves doubted. In Matthew’s gospel, for example, the disciples saw the risen Jesus and worshipped him, but, the text says, “some doubted.”

They were looking right at him and yet they doubted. The gospel writers recognized that doubt and uncertainty were a part of the Christian experience, from the very beginning. The recounting of this event between Jesus and Thomas is a way of saying, “Yes, it may be difficult to believe.”

The same holds true for us today. Some days we find it’s quite easy to believe. Other times, questions seem to haunt us. Questions like, “Is it really true? How can we be sure?”

Our trust in God sometimes seems like spring weather. One day its warm and sunny and hope is in the air. Life is good; life makes sense. It’s good to be alive, and God is just like I learned in Sunday School – good and gracious and firmly on top of things.

But then there are other times – like maybe now with this pandemic – when clouds move in, and the weather is unsettled. The temperature drops and flurries fill the sky, and we think, “What the heck?!” At times like this,

our trust in God can take a nose dive, like the temperature, and the bottom seems to drop out of our faith. When that happens, we need to deal with doubt because it can become dangerous. It can harden into unbelief, and that is nothing to mess with. Unbelief is destructive.

You see doubts don't go away by ignoring them. Covering them up and shoving them away does not get rid of doubts. Many of us were told to "Just believe." Meanwhile our doubts have been forced underground and pushed out of sight. But they are still there.

All the while, these doubts are forming a spiritual void inside us. This spiritual abscess hardens into disbelief. Human beings still have a hunger for God, though, and so they go looking for the divine in all the wrong places. People turn to addictions. People seek after money, or prestige.

There's a void inside and they try to fill it with something else. That's why doubts have the greatest potential for danger when they are denied, hidden or buried.

But Christianity doesn't shy away from doubt. We don't paint over top of it; we don't sweep it under the rug. Rather we face it directly, because only then can we do something about it.

That's why I'm so glad the Bible has included this story about St. Thomas. You heard me right, St. Thomas. He was one of the original 12 disciples and he was eventually canonized as a saint, having been martyred for his faith after serving as a missionary in India. And yet we remember him for doubting. But he dealt with his doubt.

We don't know a lot about Thomas before John 20:19. He's mentioned only a few other times, but he seems to have been a realist, one of those practical people. And he seems to have been cautious. For some reason we don't know, he wasn't with the disciples the week before.

Thomas missed Easter. But now it was a week later, and when Thomas got back with the other disciples, he found that they were still grieving the loss of Jesus. Thomas didn't know about the four stages of grief, outlined by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the guru on death and dying, but Thomas knew denial when he saw it.

In fact, the other disciples were so deep in denial that they were actually claiming Jesus was alive, and that they had seen him. This was more than a realistic fellow like Thomas could swallow. His brothers needed a little therapy. They needed something to shake them out of their denial.

"Hey listen and wise up, you guys. We all miss Jesus, but he's gone. Unless I put my finger into the nail marks, and unless I put my hand in his side, I will not believe." And that was that, as far as Thomas was concerned

Like I said, it was a week later and the disciples were together again, including Thomas. Imagine his surprise when Jesus showed up. But notice this. Jesus wasn't angry with Thomas. He didn't reprimand him, or shame him for having doubted. He simply said, "Come closer. Put your finger here. Reach out your hand. Have faith, Thomas."

Unfortunately, Thomas wasn't there the first time Jesus appeared to the disciples. He was separated from his brothers and sisters, which is to say he was separated from the church. Because of that, Thomas missed out on Easter, and his doubts were directly related to that separation.

But then Thomas rejoined the disciples, he came back to church. In other words, he brought his doubt to church, which is where it belongs. Because, in the church we can deal with our questions. We don't have to bury our doubts, we can seek after answers.

Yes, doubt is a dangerous thing, especially when we keep our doubts

and questions outside of the church. Doubts grow stronger and eventually turn into disbelief. No, the place for doubt is right here, in the church, where we can deal with it. After all, the Lord is present here. We are his community of believers, the Body of Christ.

My dear friends in Christ, faith is not simply agreeing to believe in a certain set of ideas, or subscribing to dogma. Faith is much better understood as a relationship of trust. When we have faith, we trust God. When doubt enters in, we begin to believe that God has forgotten us, or that God doesn't care about what's going, or even worse – that God doesn't even exist.

Faith means to trust God, even when you have questions. Jesus didn't berate Thomas for having questions, or wanting things made more clear to him. Jesus, in fact, knew that it would be difficult for some people to believe. And so he said:

“Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet who believe.” Friends, that's you and me. Can you trust God, even with your questions? Listen, our doubts don't scare Jesus. He understands them. He welcomes them and wants to help us to work through our questions. Jesus takes his time with us when we do have questions.

So, let me ask you, can you trust in the Lord, even if you haven't seen Him? Jesus called those who believe, even though they haven't seen “blessed.” That is most of Christianity. There were only a few people, maybe a couple of hundred according to Paul, who actually got to witness the risen Christ. But we are all called to believe.

I love the text from 1 Peter this morning. It says: “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with indescribable and glorious joy.” (1 Peter 1:8)

In the midst of this pandemic it would be easy to have doubts, to have questions about the goodness of the Lord, or about God's power, love and care for His people. In hard times it can be challenging to trust in God's love, care and grace. Jesus calls those who believe, even though they can't see God, blessed.

After Jesus was taken to Heaven, human beings no longer had eye-witness experiences of the risen Christ. But we are still called to believe. Here's the point, whether we see this Christ or not, He is the one drawing us into this trusting relationship with God the father.

As 1 Peter goes on to say, "It is through him you have come to trust God." (1 Peter 1:21) Unseeing faith can be just as steadfast as the witness of Mary Magdalene, Peter or John. You and I are still part of how God is at work in the world. There is no division or hierarchy among Christians, those who have seen and those who haven't.

For many of us, myself included, we have never had a vision of the Lord, never heard his voice audibly, never had a blinding Damascus Road conversion experience. And yet the Holy Spirit has empowered us to give an account of our trust in the Lord.

Maybe it's as simple as, "I believe because over the years my heart and my head tell me that this (referring to God and Christ) is the best way for me and for humanity." We can't point to a time when we saw the Lord, but the Holy Spirit has allowed us to trust anyway.

You and I dear friends are called to have faith, simply to trust in the Lord. It's a journey, sometimes, maybe often, accompanied by doubt. But none of us have to claim an extraordinary experience to say that we believe. Even with our doubts and our questions, we can still have a relationship with the risen Christ. In fact, he calls us blessed. Amen? Amen!