

“Unless I See”

Introduction: Do you ever wonder how people come to faith in Jesus? Why do some people seem to believe easily, some struggle, and some not seem to care? How did you come to faith? Or, if you’re still exploring it all, what do you need to move forward? I wish I could give you a formula, but there really isn’t one. The best I can say is that are different steps each person takes on their journey toward and with Jesus.

However, as John brings his account of the life of Jesus to a close, he tells his readers that a significant part of the process of both coming to faith, and also growing in our faith, has to do with considering what he calls the “signs” that he has recorded for us, signs that are the accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. They include the changing water to wine, various healings, the feeding of the five thousand, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. John says that there are actually a whole lot of such signs but the ones he’s recorded in his gospel are the most significant and the most helpful.

In this light, as we continue to explore the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, we’ll think about how one his followers, the one dubbed “doubting Thomas,” became “believing Thomas,” as he pondered the ultimate sign – the death and resurrection of Jesus – and how Thomas’ moving from doubt to belief can help us take next steps.

As we listen to the text, let’s locate ourselves once again in the house where the disciples of Jesus were hiding out after the crucifixion and trying to make sense of the news of resurrection. Thomas, it turns out, was not present on that first Sunday . . . so if you missed what happened at church last week, you’re in good company – so did Thomas! Let’s see what he missed, and then what happened when he came. [READ]

I. The Day of Resurrection

A. Recall that last week, on the evening of the day of resurrection, many of Jesus’ followers had hidden behind locked doors, afraid that the Jewish leaders, in concert with the Roman authorities, might decide to come after them. Fear, we noted, might also have arisen from the scorn friends and neighbors might say about what seemed to be a failed object of faith. Possibly, too was fear of how Jesus might respond to them given that they had all deserted him while he hung dying on the cross. But we then saw Jesus making his way graciously not only through the locked doors of their room but also through the locked doors of their hearts. He met them in their fear and pronounced “peace” – a word of shalom, forgiveness, well-being – to them. Then he called them to extend that peace to others: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you,” anticipating as he did so the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

A 17<sup>th</sup> c. prayer from the church of the Netherlands, found in what is called the Canons of Dort, sums up well what took place in that room: “Resurrected Lord, your crafty Holy Spirit gets into the deepest places of human lives, loosing locked-down hearts and softening crusty ones.” Jesus came through locked doors to open locked hearts.

B. Interestingly, the first “other” the disciples went to was one of their own, Thomas, whose heart was still in “locked-down” mode. Thomas was not in that room into which Jesus had come and revealed himself. We’re not told why, but I’d hazard a guess that Thomas was one of those fellows that just had to grieve alone. He needed to process the death of Jesus by himself. His friends had respected that but now they just had to share their newfound joy! Jesus was alive!!

However, Thomas wasn’t buying any of it. His response has become iconic:

Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

From that response the name doubting Thomas emerged. But, I’m not sure that’s totally fair! In actual fact, Thomas simply wanted the evidence that the others had received when Jesus showed them his hands and his side – the marks of his crucifixion. Thomas wanted evidence that the one who they said was now alive was actually the one who had been crucified.

C. We like Thomas, don’t we? Thomas, you may remember, was the one who was not afraid to ask Jesus what in the world he was talking about when Jesus was trying to explain to his followers about his upcoming death and resurrection and ascension, and that after it all he would come back and take them with him to a place he was preparing for them. All the others were nodding their heads, pretending to understand, while Thomas was the brave one who said, “Wait a minute . . . what?!” We need those intellectually honest people in our lives – in our classrooms and offices and churches – folks who aren’t afraid to ask difficult questions, to be the one to admit that they really don’t understand (John 14:1-5). And Thomas was also the courageous one, the one who was not afraid to follow Jesus to Jerusalem where those who had tried to stone him on a previous occasion were lying in wait. “If he goes, we go, even if it means we must die with him,” Thomas challenged the others (Jn. 11:1-16).

## II. A Week Later

A. What I appreciate about Thomas is his desire to have in some way the assurance and confidence that Hebrews 11 speaks of: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” And what I appreciate about Jesus is his willingness to give Thomas the confidence and assurance he needed. Jesus, at this point, didn’t get mad or tell Thomas to stop asking questions. Instead, Jesus continued to move toward Thomas and encouraged him to investigate. When the disciples were next together, this time with Thomas, Jesus came back into that room, repeated his pronouncement of peace, and then invited Thomas to check out his hands and side.

B. At this point, it seems, Thomas felt so loved and cared for by Jesus that he bypassed Jesus’ invitation for Thomas to touch his wounds. Instead, Thomas, the staunch doubter, blurted out the greatest declaration of the identity of Jesus that we have in the NT: “My Lord and my God!” Jesus was ultimate and final reality, the one to whom Thomas would give total allegiance. Doubting Thomas had become believing Thomas.

C. Can you relate in any way to Thomas this morning? Would his request, “Unless I see,” have been your request? Is it still your request? Sometimes, we’re led to believe that doubt is a bad or weak thing. While there is a time when we need to take the next step, asking tough questions can

be a healthy component of helping us see, to developing or strengthening our faith. When we ask hard questions like, “What about other religions?” or “What about evil and suffering?” or “What about the findings of science?” we open doorways into the hallway of doubt. But it’s a hallway that can be helpful to walk down. As Tim Keller put it in his *The Reason for God* (xvi):

A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic.

Our faith can collapse quickly, Keller goes on to observe, unless we’ve spent some time wrestling with our doubts, which can actually strengthen, not weaken, our faith.

### III. Days and Years After

A. If you find yourself wrestling as you walk down the hallway of doubt, know that you have a companion, Thomas, to walk with you and help you to see. “Because you have seen me, you have believed,” Jesus says to Thomas. But then he goes on: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” So, well might we ask, “If Thomas saw and then believed, how come we’re supposed to believe without seeing?” Well, we’re really not; it’s just that we’re called to see in a different way.

Illustration: It’s not unlike someone who looks out of a window and observes people in the street pointing up excitedly at the sky. Because the direction in which they are pointing is back behind the observer, he cannot see what they see; he needs to be satisfied with their description.

B. And so we can hear: “Blessed are you who cannot share Thomas’ experience of sight because of your historical position, but who, because you can read of his experience, can share his faith.” In other words, we who live 2000 years after Jesus have that kind of view. We hear the shouts of exclamation, we study the gestures and words of the gospels, and we rely on what others have seen. If Thomas’ faith is anchored in his sight, ours is anchored in his testimony, in what it took a skeptic to see.

C. Seeing through the testimony of eyewitnesses is a reminder that the Christian faith is anchored, not in a metaphor but in history. Nor is Christianity just a set of moral principles, or a philosophy of life, or a big idea. It has components of each of these, but overall, at its core, the Christian faith is rooted in the God who acts in space and time and history and who, by so acting, promises to make all things new. Those acts become signs that point to who our God is. Believing Thomas, and the evidence of his faith, becomes for us one of those signs.

Although we cannot see in the same way Thomas saw, may we allow him to help point us further down that great road of faith toward the life that is truly life.