

Believing is Seeing

John 20:19-29

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Today is “Doubting Thomas” Sunday.

On Easter, we shout, “Christ is risen!” But on the Sunday after Easter, we’re given the chance to say, “I don’t know... Did that *really* happen?” It’s literally built into our liturgical calendar. And the skeptics among us get to thank Thomas.

It was evening on that first Easter Sunday. The disciples were gathered behind locked doors. They had closed themselves in and locked the place up tight like a fortress. The writer of John says it was because they were afraid — afraid of the folks who killed Jesus probably. But maybe it was something more than that, too.

Craig Barnes says:

“When I was in grad school, my family moved into an apartment in South Chicago. When we saw that the door of the apartment had four locks, we wondered why we needed so many. I soon discovered that the benefit was mostly emotional. When we got inside at night, after being worried about whatever, we could shut the door on the world and turn lots of little levers. ‘Click, click, click.’

I think of that door when I’m listening to people describe how they cope with their fears. They are keeping their hearts behind a door with lots of locks because something out there makes them afraid” (“Crying Shame,” *The Christian Century*, April 5, 2004).

Maybe the disciples weren’t just worried that those who had killed Jesus might kill them, too. Maybe their fear went deeper. Maybe they didn’t want to deal with the scorn of those who knew they had failed. They had even failed at protecting Jesus. Despite all their earlier bravado, they were afraid of the cross... And they were ashamed.

So they locked themselves away — which is a wonderful metaphor for what might have been happening in their hearts, too.

But here’s the great part: it turns out locks have little effect on the risen Jesus. He came and stood among them and spoke a word of *peace* into their fear. “*Peace* be with you,” he said. He volunteered his wounds to them, so that they’d know it was him. And then he commissioned them, breathing the Holy Spirit into their lives.

But Thomas — the one called “the twin” — wasn’t there. He didn’t see Jesus, didn’t see his wounds, wasn’t there for the commissioning or for Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit on them. The others tried to tell him all about it, but he just couldn’t wrap his head

around it. “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” (John 20:25).

Then a week later (that’s today, if you all are keeping count) all those disciples had again locked themselves away in that same house. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came and stood among them *again*. He said, “Peace be with you” *again*.

But then he turned to Thomas and he said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe” (John 20:27).

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). And that is the story of how “Doubting Thomas” Sunday was born – because one week after Easter, Jesus made a special appearance for Thomas’s sake.

You know, most icons of Thomas [SLIDE #19] portray him sticking his index finger into the wounds of Jesus.

Jesus stands to the side, arm raised, exposing the wound of the spear that pierced his side. If you look close, you might also see the wounds in Jesus’ hands. And Thomas, who looks minuscule compared to Jesus, reaches out with his index finger, touching the wound – the proof Thomas needed to finally believe.

Truth be told, we aren’t that different than Thomas.

Twenty-five miles northeast of Mosul, Iraq, the Mar Mattai monastery is built into the side of a rugged mountain. Inside this fourth century complex, a reliquary allegedly contains the index finger of the apostle Thomas. Thanks to this scripture passage, his index finger has become one of the most celebrated index fingers in history – never mind the fact that scripture never says if Thomas actually did touch Jesus’ wounds.

What’s more, basilicas in both Rome and Ortona, Italy *also* claim to have Thomas’s full index finger, which, if true, would have given him at least one more index finger than most of us have ever had (Peter Marty, *The Christian Century*, March 24, 2021, 23).

Now, why would anyone want to remove the index finger off of Thomas’s corpse, seal it in a first century mason jar, and hold onto it for the next 2000+ years?

Because what if that finger actually touched the wounds in Jesus’ side or the marks on his hands? What if that finger is the concrete, artifactual link between us and the risen Christ? What if it is just the proof *we* need?

So, we have saved *three* index fingers, even though Thomas only had two hands... You see, we aren’t that different than Thomas.

Your seventh grade biology class is supposed to be looking for swimming paramecium on the glass slide under the powerful lens of the microscope, but all you can see is a haze. Then one of your classmates finally gets her microscope in focus and yells out, "I got it! I got it!" You run over to her table and say, "Let me see!"

Your 5'10" best friend who has never been known for his athletic prowess tells you that he dunked a basketball on a regulation height hoop last night while shooting around. You look at him kind of sideways and say, "Prove it. Let me see."

You're a brand new grandmother. You just got the call from your daughter who gave birth to a baby girl 30 minutes ago. It doesn't matter how detailed her description is – "Mom, she has thick hair, big dark eyes, and the cutest little frog legs – just like me when I was born." You'll be incredulous until you can get out to Pittsburgh and actually *see* this new baby yourself. Only then will you believe this is real.

Your pastor tells you a story about the largest trout he's ever seen – so big that it filled the net and had its head and tail poking out either side. You wonder to yourself, "Yeah, and just how big was that net?" He says it got away without even getting a photo of it. You say to yourself, "Sounds like every single 'big fish' story I've ever heard. I won't believe it until I *see* it."

This is the doctrine we live by: "Seeing is believing."

But the problem for us Christians is the fact that our faith in God is not provable. We just can't prove the veracity of the resurrection. In fact, while Jesus obliged Thomas's ultimatum, he has never obliged any of mine. My job would be whole a lot easier if I could just count on Jesus showing up every once in a while, holding out his hands to the congregation and saying, "Reach out your finger and touch the scars if you want."

But he hasn't done it yet. Instead, he says to Thomas – and to us: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and who have come to believe" (John 20:29).

We tend to live by the doctrine that says, "Seeing is believing," but the Christian Church is founded on a complete reversal of this doctrine. For us, "believing is seeing," and not the other way around.

There is a way in which believing in another actually creates a form of sight, of insight, of perception. Believing in Jesus – in the way of Jesus – can change the way we see ourselves and others.

C.S. Lewis said it this way: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

Have you ever noticed the disproportionate interest that Jesus showed in blind people?

The condition of being blind requires that person to trust or believe in something without their eyes being able to see it. Every next step of a blind person demands an element of trust. Is the path in front of me level or filled with obstacles? Is a car coming? Will they see the stop light? Will they be looking for a pedestrian? Will my guide dog keep me from walking into danger? If I get turned around, can I trust that someone will help me? Who will guide my way?

It's no wonder that Jesus had an affection for those who are blind. Each step is a step in trust. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," he says to Thomas.

Of course, in scripture, physical blindness serves as a metaphor for spiritual blindness. And the truth is, we are all in need of a trustworthy image of God to guide us. Because, if C.S. Lewis is right, how we see God *is* how we will see everything else.

If our image of God is vindictive, our religion will be, too.

If our image of God is exclusionary, our church will be, too.

If our image of God is hateful or judgmental or angry, our behavior will be, too.

But what if our image of God is one of love... compassion... acceptance... forgiveness... generosity... honesty... mercy... faithfulness?

Several years ago, Bill Keene "took a break from his own ministry to care for his own father as he died of cancer. His father had become a frail man, dependent on Bill to do everything for him. Though he was physically not what he had been, and the disease was wasting him away, his mind remained alert and lively.

In the role reversal common to children who care for their dying parents, Bill would put his father to bed and then read him to sleep, exactly as his father had done for him in his childhood. Bill would read from some novel, and his father would lie there, staring at his son, smiling.

Bill was exhausted from the day's care and work, and would plead with his dad, 'Look, here's the idea: I read to you. You fall asleep.'

Bill's father would impishly apologize and dutifully close his eyes, but this wouldn't last long. Soon enough, Bill's father would pop one eye open and smile at his son. Bill would catch him and whine, 'Now, come on.' The father would again oblige until he couldn't any more, and the other eye would open to catch a glimpse of his son.

This went on and on, and after his father's death, Bill knew that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn't take his eyes off his kid.

How much more so God?" (Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 19-20).

Anthony de Mello writes, "Behold the One beholding you and smiling!"

Today, we are invited to behold the one who comes to us in our deepest fears, no matter how tightly locked up we think they are, and speaks a word of peace.

We are invited to behold the one who comes to us in our doubts and does not judge us or condemn us, but offers his presence.

We are invited to behold the One beholding us and smiling – because the God who sees us, hopes that by his love we will see every thing else.

Amen.