

Second Sunday of Easter: John 20:19–31

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We call him “doubting Thomas,” don’t we, even though the text we just heard from John’s gospel never used the word “doubt.” It’s one of those many cases of our reading into the Scripture something that isn’t there. No one, including Jesus, said that Thomas doubted. Doubt wasn’t Thomas’ problem. Unbelief was. You might say Thomas let his doubts get in the way of his faith, and that was the problem. And so Jesus doesn’t say, “Thomas, stop doubting.” He says, “Thomas stop disbelieving and believe.” There is a difference.

Doubt happens for a variety of reasons. You hear about something that is contrary to your experience and everything you know, and so naturally you’re going to doubt. When people first suggested that the earth we stand on isn’t flat but spherical, there were doubters. It sure looks flat to me. Especially if you stand in one of the Dakotas or up in the plains of Saskatchewan, it’s flat as a pancake. Short of some really hard evidence to the contrary, a round earth is a pretty hard sell. When Copernicus did the math and suggested that the earth actually orbited around the sun, there were doubters. Luther among them. It seemed ridiculous. From our vantage point, the sun, moon, and stars all seem to move across the sky like some big movie screen and the earth we are standing on seems to be pretty fixed. We don’t even have any sense of motion. So everything they knew and sensed said that the earth was fixed and the heavenly bodies moved around a fixed earth. An orbiting earth was a pretty hard sell at the time.

Whenever you encounter something outside of your range of experience, you are going to have doubt. It’s natural. We’re wired to see patterns, and when there is a break in the pattern, our minds automatically wonder, “Is that right? Did I see that correctly? Are you sure?”

Imagine being Thomas. He’d missed “church” the Sunday before when the disciples were all gathered in that locked upper room and Jesus appeared in their midst and showed them His wound, and spoke peace, and breathed on them. See what happens when you miss church? You miss the risen Lord Jesus, that’s what happens. And you’re left to stew in your doubts

instead. The disciples went to Thomas and told him the news, “We have seen the Lord.” And Thomas didn’t believe them.

Who could blame him? Thomas, like everyone of his time, knew that dead men don’t ordinarily rise from the dead. Thomas is sane, rational, reasonable, just like most of us are. He wasn’t prone to believe fantastic tales, and he wasn’t going to take anyone’s word on Jesus either. OK, so they thought they saw the Lord Jesus. But could they be sure it was the Lord? Maybe it was an imposter. Maybe it was a figment of their imaginations. There were lots of reasonable explanations, and “He is risen indeed!” was not one of them.

Thomas proposes a little scientific test of their claim that they had seen the Lord. “Show me the wounds and let me touch them. 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.” Fair enough. The wounds would indicate that this was the real deal Jesus. No fake. No stand in. No imposter. This is the One who was crucified. The wounds mark Him as the crucified One. And not just seeing the wounds would do. The eyes can be tricky sometimes, and seeing doesn’t rule out some kind of phantom or figment of the imagination like so many ghost stories. He wants to touch the wounds. Put his finger into the nail holes, stick his hand into Jesus’ side. Now that’s hard evidence. Anyone who doubts after that would have to be crazy.

What’s missing here is the Word. Thomas had forgotten the words of Jesus. All the disciples had, including the women. Mary Magdalene was literally staring at risen Jesus in the garden and thought He was the gardener. Peter and John had to run to the tomb to see for themselves because they didn’t believe the report of the women and they forgot the words of Jesus. He told them that He would die and on the third day rise. He spelled it out for them plainly, at least three times. They’d spent three years with Jesus. They saw Him heal the sick, drive out demons, raise three people from the dead. They’d heard what He said and still they didn’t believe Him. The week before, they were huddled in fear in a locked room. They didn’t believe the words of Jesus. The problem with all of them was not that they were skeptical or doubtful but unbelieving.

Same with Thomas. Of course, he wants to see Jesus for himself with his own eyes. Of course he wants to touch the wounds to be sure he’s not just seeing things. Of course he’s skeptical, as any of us would be, as all of Jesus’ disciples were. And I’m glad they were all skeptical, because if they had just bought the Easter news wholesale, I’d be more than a little skeptical

about their story. I'm glad that the gospel writers included their doubts, which then speak to our doubts.

Whenever you deal with things unseen, there are going to be doubts. Doubts are dealt with by seeing the thing for yourself. And, if necessary, touching it. That's why historic sites are so important. There is something very concrete about seeing the thing and touching it. It makes it "real" to us because we are sensory creatures. It's not enough to be told, we have to see it and touch it for ourselves. That's why "show & tell" was so popular in grade school. You didn't just tell about something, you brought it in and showed everyone.

Thomas isn't wrong for saying "Show me the Jesus with holes in Him and let me touch him for myself." That's how doubts are dealt with. By hard evidence. But that's not Thomas' problem, and it's not really our problem either. Thomas' problem is that he thinks he'll believe when he sees. Thomas is the ultimate Missourian. Missouri is the "show me" state. "I'll believe it when I see it." "I'll believe Jesus is risen from the dead when I see a Jesus with five holes in Him and I touch Him. Short of that, I will never believe."

Thomas' problem, and ours too, is that he let his doubts get in the way of faith. Here's how faith would have dealt with the news that the disciples had seen the Lord. Faith would say, "Well, I know that dead men don't rise, at least ordinarily. I know that Jesus raised a few dead people, three in all, including Lazarus. But most importantly, I heard Him say that He would be crucified and on the third day rise again from the dead. And His words are true. They are Spirit and life. They are the words of eternal life. They are the words of the Son of God. And so I'm going to say, 'He's risen indeed, alleluia!' even if I never see Him or get to touch Him. It's good enough that a few of my friends saw Him, but most importantly, He said He would rise, and His Word is all that matters."

That's why the unseeing yet believing are blessed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. That's you sitting here this morning. That's me standing here in the pulpit. We have no Jesus with holes to look at. We have no wounds to touch. We have the water of Baptism. We have the bread and wine of the Supper. We have His words. And that is enough for faith. "Faith comes by hearing," not seeing, not by investigating, not by experimentation. Hearing the word of Christ.

If you listen carefully, you'll realize that things didn't go the way Thomas wanted. The next Sunday, the disciples are again all together in a locked room (they can't seem to get over this

locked room thing), and this time Thomas is with them. And the Lord again appears and says, “Peace be with you” and shows them His wounds. And then He looks at Thomas and says, “Put your finger here in my hands; put your hand here in my side.” It’s as though Jesus had been there next to Thomas when He said that, because Jesus was next to Thomas when he said that. There isn’t anywhere where He isn’t.

And then Jesus says the words that bring faith to Thomas: “Do not disbelieve but believe.” Those words are what make Thomas’ words possible. “My Lord and my God.” He never touches the wounds. He doesn’t have to. The words of Jesus have had their way with Thomas. You see, you don’t have to see Jesus to believe, you have to hear Jesus to believe. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

You are blessed in your not seeing. Seeing is not believing, and if you see, you don’t have to believe. Seeing can be distracting, which is one reason why forty days after Jesus rose from the dead He disappeared into a cloud. He withdrew His visible presence. Instead He is present in another, more profound way. In a sacramental way by His Word. It’s just as real as a Jesus with holes standing right in front of us. In fact, it’s more “real” if you can imagine such a thing. A Jesus you can see would actually be a distraction to faith.

When I came into preschool chapel on Thursday morning, they had a cardboard Jesus figure standing in front of the kids. I noticed a few things about this Jesus cardboard cutout figure. One was that he looked more German or Norwegian than Middle Eastern. Second, he was shorter than I am by at least half a foot, which may not be far off based on what we know of people living at the time of Jesus. Third, he looked either like Kenny Loggins or Fabio, but not really anything like a carpenter from Nazareth. And fourth, He didn’t have any wounds. The Jesus who died for your sins, and for the sins of the world has wounds and probably doesn’t look like Fabio.

Seeing is not believing. Seeing is, well, seeing. If we saw Jesus standing here this morning, we would still have to believe that our sins are forgiven because of Him, that He had conquered our death by His death, that we have life in His Name. Seeing Him would do nothing to quiet that restless, guilty conscience of yours, nor would it make you any more confident facing your life and your death. You would just have a visible Jesus to believe in instead of a sacramental Jesus.

Jesus knows how to deal with your doubts and your unbelief. That's the takehome from this morning's Gospel. Jesus knew what Thomas needed to believe – His wounds and His words. He knows what you need too. He's given you the signs in your Baptism, in His Supper, in His Word. John has graciously recorded the signs that He did so that you might continue to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing, have life in His name.

That's all you need. Bring your doubts, your fears, your unbelief to Jesus. He'll deal with them.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "John 20:19-31 / 2 Easter 2016", posted 2016-06-08 (<https://htlcms.org/2016/06/john-2019-31-2-easter-2016/>).