

The Doubt and Faith of Thomas

Pastor Chris Sicks

John 20:24–31

April 9 2023 Easter sermon

Last week in worship we learned about an incident that happened a week before Easter.

The religious and political leaders of Israel, called the Sanhedrin, made plans to kill Jesus.

He was a threat to their grip on power.

The Sanhedrin thought that by killing one innocent man, they could maintain control.

But we talked last week about the illusion of control.

God is sovereign--that means He is always in control.

It is true that the Sanhedrin succeeded in killing Jesus.

But the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday proved the Sanhedrin were never in control.

Today we look at another passage from John's Gospel, about doubt and faith.

Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter Sunday, and then again a week later.

Listen now to God's Word, from John 20:24–31.

24 "One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came.

25 They told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

26 Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them.

The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them.

"Peace be with you," he said.

27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands.

Put your hand into the wound in my side.

Don't be faithless any longer--Believe!"

28 "My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed.

29 Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me.

Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

30 The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book.

31 But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name."

Together we read Isaiah 40:8:

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Please pray with me.

Father in heaven, we come to you because you are the source of life and truth.

Jesus, we worship because you are full of mercy and love.

Holy Spirit, please open our hearts and minds to be transformed by the word of God, amen.

I am thankful for Thomas, and I think you also will be, after we think about this passage together.

Jesus had 12 very close friends and disciples--that word means "follower" or "student."

Thomas was one of them.

Before the crucifixion, all the disciples had some kind of faith in Jesus.

That's why they followed him around for three years.

But the apostles did not have mature faith, because they also had faith in themselves.

Listen to John 13:36-37.

36 Simon Peter asked, "Lord, where are you going?"

And Jesus replied, "You can't go with me now, but you will follow me later."

37 "But why can't I come now, Lord?" he asked.

"I'm ready to die for you."

Peter thought he had enough faith to die for Jesus, but Peter was wrong.

The night that Jesus was arrested, Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus.

Now listen to John 11:16.

16 "Thomas, nicknamed the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let's go, too--and die with Jesus."

Peter and Thomas had faith in Jesus, but it was immature faith that needed to grow.

Before that could happen, Peter and Thomas had to lose faith in themselves.

True and enduring faith in Jesus can only come when we abandon faith in anything else.

I was an atheist for 10 years, but I don't think true atheists exist.

We all put our faith and trust in something.

When I was young, I thought beer and women could fill my empty heart.

Many people seek peace and security in money, or success, or relationships.

How about you?

Where does your heart wander?

What lies does Satan whisper to you, to distract you from trusting in Jesus alone?

Whenever you doubt God, you are trusting in something else.

Why did Eve begin to doubt God and his promises?

Because Eve began to trust the serpent.

Thomas trusted his eyes more than the words of Jesus.

Both Peter and Thomas trusted in their courage--until their lives were actually in danger.

What are you trusting in?

Whatever you trust in other than God, I promise it will disappoint you.

But that is a good thing.

Because we must lose faith in ourselves and this world, before we can have true faith in Jesus.

Jesus actually wanted Peter to lose faith in himself, so Peter could have deep faith in Jesus.

After the resurrection, God sent Peter with his new faith to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts chapter 10.

Historians believe that Thomas took the gospel to India.

But before Thomas could be a gospel messenger, he needed to have a deep faith in the risen Savior.

Look with me again at verses 24 and 25, please.

24 "One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came.

25 They told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he replied, "I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side."

That first conversation happened on Resurrection Sunday.

Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the disciples.

When they told Thomas what happened, he thought the women and disciples were crazy or confused.

Because Thomas saw Jesus die on the cross.

He saw the lifeless body of his Lord and friend.

Thomas knew people don't come back to life after three days in the ground--right?

Except Thomas had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead a week earlier.

Jesus had proved he was not an ordinary man.

Why does Thomas have so much doubt?

Why didn't Thomas believe his brothers and sisters when they said Jesus was alive?

I am actually very encouraged by the doubt of Thomas.

The lack of faith in this disciple is a blessing to us.

Because we often struggle to believe.

We think that if we had more evidence, we would have more faith.

When we struggle to believe, we expect God to send us a dream, or a vision, or a big dramatic miracle.

But remember the words of Jesus in verse 29: "You believe because you have seen me.

Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

Jesus does not reject us when our faith is small.

He meets us where we are.

The weak faith of Thomas reminds me of what another man said to Jesus.

The disciples brought to Jesus a boy who was possessed by a demon.

Listen to Mark 9:20-24.

20 "So they brought the boy.

But when the evil spirit saw Jesus, it threw the child into a violent convulsion, and he fell to the ground, writhing and foaming at the mouth.

21 "How long has this been happening?" Jesus asked the boy's father.

He replied, "Since he was a little boy.

22 The spirit often throws him into the fire or into water, trying to kill him.

Have mercy on us and help us, if you can."

23 "What do you mean, 'If I can'?" Jesus asked.

"Anything is possible if a person believes."

24 The father instantly cried out, "I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!"

This is all that God asks of us, my friends.

He does not ask us to have faith that never doubts.

God asks us to believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and then he helps our faith to grow.

Coming to church on Sunday is one way God helps our faith to grow.

The Christian habit of gathering on Sundays actually begins in today's scripture text.

Jesus first appeared to the disciples on Easter Sunday.

And John reports in verse 26 that the disciples gathered again "eight days later."

In that time and culture, you included the first day when you counted.

So "eight days later" is the equivalent of us saying "one week later."

This is what I want you to see: the disciples gathered together on two consecutive Sundays.

And when they gathered, Jesus showed up.

The apostle John is telling us that Sunday worship is important.

He's also indicating that the Saturday Jewish Sabbath was replaced with the Sunday Lord's Day for Christians.

Jesus promised the disciples in Matthew 18:20,

20 "Where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."

That is still true.

When we gather for prayer meetings, Life Groups, and for Sunday worship, Jesus is spiritually present among us.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples, he appeared right in the middle of them.

Jesus should be the central focus of every worship service.

Every song we sing, every sermon we preach--it should all focus on Jesus.

If you walk out of here saying, "what a great sermon!" then I have not done my job.

My goal is that you will walk out saying, "what a great Savior!"

That's my hope and prayer.

Now let's look again at John 20:26-28.

26 Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them.

The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them.

"Peace be with you," he said.

27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at my hands.

Put your hand into the wound in my side.

Don't be faithless any longer--Believe!"

28 "My Lord and my God!" Thomas exclaimed.

Jesus said "peace be with you" because the disciples were probably startled to see him.

Then Jesus speaks directly to Thomas.

Remember that Jesus was not there a week earlier, when Thomas said:

"I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands." (John 20:25b)

How did Jesus know what Thomas said, if Jesus wasn't there?

It's amazing that one week later Jesus responds directly to Thomas' doubts.

This is a subtle reminder about the divinity of Jesus.

Maybe Thomas prayed about this, and Jesus heard that prayer.

Maybe Jesus looked into Thomas' heart and saw his doubt.

The point is this: Jesus is God, who can hear our prayers, see our hearts, and remove our doubts.

Notice that Thomas called Jesus "my God" in verse 28, and Jesus does not correct him.

Jesus receives the faith of Thomas, and accepts the title "God."

Jesus compliments Thomas, in fact, for declaring his divinity.

I also love the very personal words that Thomas speaks.

Perhaps you know John 3:16.

"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

God loved the world enough to send his Son.

But when he saves us, God saves us one at a time.

We see that personal experience in the words of Thomas in verse 28:

“MY Lord and MY God!”

Isn't that beautiful?

Only Christianity offers us the opportunity to worship God personally like this.

And only Christianity offers to this broken world a God who has scars.

Did you notice that the resurrected body of Jesus still has the wounds of crucifixion?

Even today, Jesus carries the scars with him, proof of his love and victory.

In his sinless life, Jesus proved he was the perfect sacrifice who could atone for all our sins.

In his sacrificial death, Jesus removed our sin and shame when they were buried with his dead body.

When you look at the scarred body of our resurrected Savior, you see the heart of God.

The scars on the body of Jesus tell the story of our salvation.

Each of us have scars--some physical, some emotional.

Our scars tell stories, they are the poems of our pain.

But our scars do not define us.

Through faith in Jesus we live in resurrection hope.

And when we are honest with each other about our scars, we help others to grow in their faith.

That is one of the gifts we get from Thomas.

Through his experience, our faith grows.

Millions of people have put their trust in Jesus, although we have never seen him.

And we don't need to see him.

Seeing him physically is not enough to produce faith.

Remember that the Sanhedrin called a meeting because Jesus was performing many signs.

They admitted that Jesus was doing miracles, but they still wanted to kill him.

The same Pharisees who wanted Jesus dead actually saw him heal the sick.

This is my point: Many people saw the resurrected Jesus and saw his miracles, but they did not believe in him.

However, the Holy Spirit can give us eyes of faith to see Jesus, even without physical evidence.

Still, we all wish we could see Jesus physically, don't we?

Thomas is our representative, our ambassador of doubt.

In Thomas we see ourselves, with our weak faith, with our doubts and questions.

Look again with me at John 20:29-31.

29 "Then Jesus told him, "You believe because you have seen me.

Blessed are those who believe without seeing me."

30 The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book.

31 But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name."

Do the pyramids in Egypt exist?

How do you know?

How many of you have physically been there?

If you haven't been to Cairo yourself, how do you know the pictures you have seen are not fake?

This is a picture of me, inside one of the pyramids.

Do you believe me, that I was there?

Good.

You can believe that the pyramids are real, without physically seeing or touching them.

That's what verses 29-31 are about.

The apostle John is telling us that he and the other disciples are reliable witnesses.

God has given us four different gospel accounts about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Here is an example of the eyewitness testimony God has provided to strengthen our faith, in John 19:32-35.

32 "So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus.

33 But when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was already dead, so they didn't break his legs.

34 One of the soldiers, however, pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water flowed out.

35 This report is from an eyewitness giving an accurate account.

He speaks the truth so that you also may continue to believe."

It is a true, historical fact that Jesus Christ died on Good Friday, and was resurrected on Easter Sunday.

Billions of people believe this, and billions do not believe it.

How about you?

This is the most-important question you will ever be asked.

Do you believe Jesus is the resurrected Savior of sinners, who can give you eternal life?

Maybe you have doubts.

On Easter Sunday, Thomas said that he had doubts.

Jesus let Thomas have a week to sit with his questions and doubts.