

BELIEVING IS SEEING

John 20:19-31

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

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Let me remind us why we look to the Gospels to find a faith that is possible for us today. First of all, it is here we find Jesus, who is the key to the whole thing. And secondly, it is here in the Gospels that we find ourselves in the struggle of the disciples to believe. After Pentecost, at the end of May, we will be going through highlights in the Book of Acts; the story of how this struggling faith became a full-blown passion through the Holy Spirit filling them, and ended up changing the world and human history.

This is the second time this year I have preached a sermon on the disciple Thomas. The first one came from the 11th chapter of John’s Gospel when Jesus told his disciples that He was going to Jerusalem to be with his close friends, Mary & Martha, as they grieved their brother, Lazarus’ death. It is an unusual window into the life of Jesus with His disciples, and of Thomas in particular. It shows a very different Thomas than we get from this more famous passage after the resurrection of Christ. In that first glimpse of this very interesting disciple, we find the 12 in mutiny against their Lord. They tell Him He is crazy to go to Jerusalem, because there was a bounty on His head and to go there would mean certain death. It was Thomas, of all people, the one history has named unfairly as “the doubter”, who steps forward and says, “C’mon we’ve followed Him this far; *let us also go, that we may die with Him.*” And I suggested that Thomas was, in fact, despite his reputation, the most committed disciple.

Let me pose the question: What would have happened to the disciples if Thomas had not won the day, in that argument with his fellow disciples? What would have happened to Christianity if the disciples had gone AWOL at that point? In one sense, they had seen it all and heard it all: they had heard the Sermon on the Mount; they had seen His amazing miracles of healing; they had witnessed their hero Jesus standing up against the religious leadership of the day that was more about what you couldn’t do than what you could do. All the ethical teaching, and remarkable character of Jesus had already been demonstrated.

If we were to be quite honest, for many Christians this is as far as it goes in their Christian faith—they try as best they can follow His example, they are inspired by His character

and want to be like Him. But when it comes to the crucifixion, it's just too gruesome. And, of course, the Resurrection is way over the top to believe, in a scientific age such as ours. Many Christians stop there. But I think you get the point. If the disciples had called it quits and gone home at this point, they would have missed the most important part, and we would not be sitting here talking about it today.

But let's give tribute for a moment to "doubting Thomas." He was the one, at that critical crossroads in the 11th chapter of John, who wasn't satisfied with a halfway faith. Thomas had to go all the way. "C'mon we've followed Him this far; *let us also go, that we may die with Him.*" He wins the day, and ironically, now only days later (John 20), he is in the place where the other disciples are all believing, and he is the one holdout: "*Unless I see the nail prints in his palms, and touch his side, I will not believe!*"

Well, you heard how the story plays out. Thomas had missed the first appearance on Easter evening. Why wasn't he there the first time? In my elders' small group this week, one of them suggested that he must have missed the email! ☺... Well, it appears that it was Thomas this time who went AWOL; maybe he was just so bitter and disillusioned with the crucifixion of his hero; maybe the rumors being spread by the women who came from the tomb, he thought, were just so much mindless hysteria. We don't know. But somehow, a week later, we find him back with the disciples, despite all his denials. There was apparently no judgment against Thomas for his attitude; all the disciples had done the same only days before. So Thomas found a safe place to work out his faith. I think our church here is such a place, thank God.

Then, in that amazing grace that characterized Jesus' life, He comes back again, especially for Thomas. He must have been listening in, invisibly, through that week; or maybe He was just doing His mind-reading thing again; but He quotes Thomas, word for word, "*Thomas, put your finger here and touch my palms; put your hand on my side; you don't need to doubt; just believe.*" Then, characteristic of Thomas, he goes all the way; he is so blown away that he takes it all the way to its logical conclusion and says what no other disciple has yet said: "*My Lord, and MY GOD!*" And so, today, we are Trinitarians.

Then comes Jesus' statement to Thomas that brings all of us in to the picture. Jesus envisions the generations upon generations who would take Thomas' affirmation of faith, leading right up to the present time: "*Thomas, you have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believed.*" That's us. Jesus blesses us because, somehow, we have believed without seeing. Or if you are in a place where you can't truly believe the resurrection, still you're here! Just like Thomas; something keeps drawing you back; maybe like Thomas, you're hoping beyond hope it is all true! You're trying, as best you can, in some way to integrate this ground zero of Christian faith into what you can believe at this stage in your faith.

Most of us who want to be Christ's disciples are part believing and part doubting anyway. Those of us who are more *believing* than *doubting* would rather say, we are mostly believers, but we *wonder* about things. That is because God has made us with a *mind*, and we are to love God with our *minds*. There is nothing wrong with *doubt* as long as that doubt has not *closed our minds*. You see, that is doubt with *an attitude*. And it blinds us to ways God keeps trying to get in touch with us. It blinds us to *mystery*. The resurrection of Christ is all about *mystery*. I mean, how could it happen? How did it happen? Something must have happened, because it changed History; it changed the people closest to Jesus, who believed so strongly they were willing to die for that claim. But *mystery*, yes!

In the small groups that I lead, we always precede our discussion of a chapter of the Gospels, with a life story that one of the participants tells. There is a certain preparation that goes into that because, in a sense, the reflecting upon our lives, is the point. The point being to try and discover, or re-discover, where God was present at certain important moments. I encourage the ones doing this to have a "believing" attitude as they look back over their lives. Some enter into that exercise with a sense of randomness about the events on their journey. They say, "Well, I don't really have a 'testimony.'" I usually respond, "Well, we'll see." Others begin the exercise with some real bitterness about events in their lives that have been just awful, painful, inexplicable. Nevertheless, the purpose of the small group is to open up new possibilities, new ways of looking at things. So we suspend judgment and don't let these inexplicables blind us to other places where we *can* see that, just maybe, God was at work! This is the experience I call "Believing becomes Seeing." It is not denying our doubts, it is simply keeping an open mind, and allowing oneself to give credibility to the possibility that God could have been at work. And so we prepare our "spiritual autobiographies," and in a small group of confidantes, we tell our stories. It is pretty amazing how eyes are opened; and a stronger belief grows. Because "believing becomes seeing." You see, in a scientific age, we think "seeing is believing"; but when we are fixed only on one set of provable facts, we miss the mystery of life.

Let me give you one simple example. When my kids were young, this is back in the 80's before cell phones, the first Nintendo video games were coming out. So when we took long trips, our kids were always in the back seat, armed with videogames. We took a trip West, through the Rocky Mountains, so the kids could see the wonder of God's creation. We drove through Rocky Mountain National Park where, it seems, every turn in the road opened up a new wonder of the majesty of the mountains. "Derek, look at that snow-capped peak!" "Yea, Dad," the voice came from the back. I glanced back, and there he was, his nose in his Nintendo videogame, as the glory passed him by!

When Thomas was apart from the other disciples through that intervening week between Easter evening and the following Sunday, his bitterness only had a chance to grow deeper, his

doubts more hardened, as he looked down into the dust of a faith that died with Jesus on that Cross. But instinctively he came back to the Fellowship, even though it must have been painful to be on the outside of the belief those disciples now held so dear. Though he could not himself believe, he put his feet where Belief was alive, where Christ was most likely to show up, if indeed there was a risen Christ at loose in the world. This was the only "believing" he could offer at that point. But in lifting his head up, he began to consider other wonders, and in so doing, the Lord met him where he was, and that believing became seeing! Alleluia! Amen.