

Reasonable Doubt

Acts 4:32-35 | Psalm 133 | 1 John 1:1 – 2:2 | John 20:19-31

JOHN 20:19-31

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' ²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.' ²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸ Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹ Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine being known only for your worst moment. What a depressing world it would be if all we knew of each other were our worst deeds, our lowest times, our most shameful acts, as if we become just one thing. It's too easy to think this way in our overly ideological and hyper-polarized age. We fail to remember that each person is more than one thing. And yet, it seems to be harder and harder to find people who have a capacity for nuance, who can even acknowledge, let alone embrace, complexity. I could name any number of political villains to demonstrate this phenomenon, all of us only knowing their heinous crimes, despite each of them being in situations a little less simple than what the history books tell us. We live in an era of single-issue voting, a world where fact takes a backseat to dogma in the fight for truth. And so, we too easily write off people who are far more multifaceted, far more complicated than is convenient for us to imagine.

We have, in our Gospel reading this morning, one such person, known throughout human history as Doubting Thomas. But to his friends and Jesus, he was just Thomas. And this story of his encounter of the resurrected Jesus is here to give us more than just his unflattering nickname. Rather, it teaches us something important about doubt and faith and even challenges us. And here it is, what I think we should learn: *He saw, so that we can believe.* He saw, so that we can believe. Let's take a closer look.

1. WAS THOMAS'S DOUBT REASONABLE?

Our story begins the night of the resurrection. Jesus, as he said he would, rose from the dead and returned to his disciples. The author makes it a point, in fact, to note that Jesus proactively

showed the disciples his hands and his side.¹ Understanding for the first time what his death and resurrection predictions were about, the disciples rejoiced.

But Thomas was not there. Where he was, we do not know. When he returned, the others informed him. *“‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘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.’”*² Thomas certainly seems to be a thoughtful, no-nonsense kind of guy, wanting the same physical and visual confirmations the other had already been given. He’s always been a thoughtful, no-nonsense kind of guy. The first time he appeared in John’s Gospel, he was a loyal friend ready to see the mission through. Upon hearing that Lazarus was dead, his simple response was *“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*³ The second time he appeared, he was asking a question. Jesus had just begun his long discourse in the upper room and was talking about going to prepare a place. Thomas inquired: *“Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”*⁴ He was the sort of guy who believed what he believed sincerely, but after asking questions, testing answers, being thoughtful. For him, doubt was his process for arriving at a conclusion. And so, when it comes to our story here in John 20, Thomas hears the testimony of his friends, but he wants evidence. He wants to see things for himself.

I believe that *doubt* can be a virtuous thing, without which, humanity would be far less interesting. It is the chief virtue of every scientific discovery—which comes about because someone had the audacity to doubt some other person’s explanation or data or conclusion. Perhaps, Thomas has a reasonable scepticism here. Or, perhaps, it is a bit more complicated. There is a difficult word in what he said: *no*. It’s buried in other language like *unless* and *will not* in our translations. *“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.”*⁵ In very literal terms, he says ‘no seeing’ means ‘no believing.’ This is more than healthy doubt. This is not even being open to faith. This is a demand that works against belief. Thomas had an opportunity to be the first believer in the resurrection purely by faith, and not by sight. But his doubt got in the way.

2. WHAT WAS JESUS’ RESPONSE?

What was Jesus’s response? A week later, Jesus returned. Thomas, who was there this time, got his evidence and he exclaimed: *“My Lord and my God!”* There is something very encouraging here. I don’t want us to miss it. Despite Thomas’s doubt-driven demands, Jesus came back. Rather than forcing Thomas to wrestle with faith the rest of his life, Jesus showed up. He didn’t even wait for Thomas to state his request, he just walked up to him and said very simply: *“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”*⁶ This was, I think, an act of grace. Though inhibited by his own doubts, Thomas was shown mercy by Jesus Christ, who met him where he was and gave him exactly what he needed to have faith.

¹ John 20:20.

² John 20:25.

³ John 11:16.

⁴ John 14:5.

⁵ Joh 20:25.

⁶ John 20:27.

But, not missing an opportunity to teach Thomas and all the disciples in that moment, Jesus continued. Notice how he responded to Thomas's exclamations of joy: *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*⁷ It reads like a rebuke, but I don't think Jesus is rebuking Thomas for doubt *per se*. Jesus knows that Thomas is far more complex and nuanced than just this scepticism. Rather, he's saying that Thomas should have believed without having to see. Doubt may be virtuous and reasonable sometimes, but it can also turn into disbelief, a barrier to faith. Thomas, who had heard Jesus teach on his coming resurrection before the events of Good Friday, who had just heard the testimony of his friends, should have had enough to believe. And, through this gracious act of Jesus, he now does. But it was a missed opportunity.

3. WHY DOES IT MATTER IF HE SAW OR JUST BELIEVED?

Of course, this all begs the question, so why does it matter to us? How does this little interaction with Thomas, this missed opportunity, make a difference to you and me? None of us was there 2,000 years ago. We didn't see the resurrected Jesus. If doubt can be virtuous, how can we possibly believe? We didn't put our hands in his side, how can we really know that this happened? In some ways, we are given the same opportunity as Thomas on that first night. Do we believe the testimony of the disciples? Do we believe that, as history has preserved these documents—and they seem to be relatively consistent—are we going to allow the possibility of faith without seeing? Do we believe because he saw?

Because this belief, this faith, matters a lot. Notice how the author concludes the story: *"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."*⁸ What could be more important than this message—this message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to save his people from sin that they may come to eternal life. Everything Jesus did was about this one thing. All of his signs, from turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana to healing the man at the pool to raising Lazarus from the dead to walking out of his own tomb, leaving it empty, everything Jesus did was to demonstrate that he is God, and so gives us life. And it is all written right here. The truth may be out there, but as Thomas learned that day, it is in here, it is in the testimony of the disciples, it is in the book. We have an opportunity for faith. It's right there in our epistle reading, words penned by the Apostle John:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, *what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands*, concerning the word of life... we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us.⁹

He saw, Thomas saw, they all saw, so that we could believe and find our way to life eternal.

CONCLUSION

⁷ John 20:29.

⁸ John 20:30-31.

⁹ 1 John 1:1-3.

May we continue to give ourselves to the testimonies given, to believing in the Word of God as it has been handed down, especially in a time when it is so easy to not believe, to be sceptical, to turn away when faced with the cost, the social consequences of being publicly identified as a Christian. Even when it is complicated by our own doubts, our own sins, our lowest moments, may we, all the more, rely on the Word of God, knowing that Christ Jesus meets us where we are and gives us what we need to keep believing, to keep clinging to the hope of life in his name. May we not turn away, for *“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

Let me pray. *Heavenly Father, may we who have not seen yet come to believe, and believe in the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, through which we come to eternal life. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*