

**Sunday; May 8, 2022**

# **Believing is Seeing**

**(Series: "From Meetings to Mission")**

**(Message Three)**

**(John 20:24-29)**

## **Scripture:**

*Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"*

*But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."*

*<sup>26</sup>A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."*

*<sup>28</sup>Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"*

*<sup>29</sup>Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."  
(John 20:24-29)*

## **Message:**

<sup>s</sup> **John Ortberg tells the story of a family with a swimming pool in their backyard.** Mom was watching her son play on the grass; then her phone rang; she stepped inside to get it. The little boy's curiosity got the best of him and when she came out just seconds later, he was in the bottom of the pool.

It didn't have to happen that way; God could have stopped it. God could have distracted him from the water or prevented the phone call. He didn't. Heaven was silent. It was the beginning of a pain that no words can name.

Mom would have died if doing so could have changed that one moment. She could not. She will live on with emptiness, guilt, blame, and aloneness.

Dostoyevsky, a believer, wrote, "*the death of a single infant calls into question the existence of God.*" Does he really exist? Does he really care?

It is called “doubt.” The Scriptural portrays “doubt” as one standing at the **crossroads**, knowing they must **choose**, unsure of the road they should take.

This kind of doubt applies to you if you’re honestly searching for faith. This kind of doubt applies to you, if, as a believer, you keep looking back at the intersection, wondering if maybe you made a mistake. This kind of doubt applies to you, if, as a believer, you are unwilling to explore the deeper recesses of the Christian life for fear it might shake your faith...

**The Truth doesn’t **change** because we ask questions; it doesn’t change because we closely examine it; it doesn’t even change because we – or others - might want it to change.** Truth is **Truth**. We should seek it with all our heart. Truth even has room for doubts.

John Ortburg wrote a book entitled, “*Faith and Doubt*.” He says the most important word in the title is the middle one: *and*. Not either/or, but both/and. Even those with strong faith have their doubts...

## THOMAS

**So, what do we know about Thomas?**

**First, Thomas was known as “Didymus.” (20:24).** Names have significance in ancient writings; *Didymus* is Greek for **twin**.

Today twins are celebrated; not so in the ancient world – they messed up the laws of inheritance and their mortality rate was much higher than single births. (So, maybe Thomas was biological twin, or maybe it is a reference to his character, and maybe it is both.)

See, in the Greek, there is a close connection between “doubt” and “two” - like between “**doubt**” and “**double**.” To “doubt” is to have **two** (double) **minds**.

In some ways we are all *twins*; we believe **and** we doubt at the same time.

**Second, He was one of the twelve - a **disciple**. He knew Jesus. He had been with **Jesus**; he believed in Jesus; he had given it all up to follow Jesus.** Then his Jesus was crucified, and Thomas’ world came apart and he began to doubt.

Thomas was willing to take a **risk**. He had said he was willing to **die** with Jesus.

**John** tells us (11:16) - “*Then Thomas (also known as Didymus), said to the rest of disciples, ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’*” (This is the first of three times we hear from Thomas in the Gospels; all are in John; all are about believing and doubting.)

Thomas knew the issue of eternal life was serious business and sometimes you need to be willing to die in order to live.

Thomas was also not afraid to ask **questions**. John shares a second word from Thomas in **John 14:3-5** - [Jesus] *"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know."* Thomas said to Him, *'Lord, we do not know where you are going, and how can we know the way?'"*

Unasked questions never get answered; if you don't ask, you may never discover the Truth; Thomas asked and received answers. The (local) church must always be a safe place where people are encouraged to come to ask questions, share fears, deal with doubts in a safe, loving environment.

Thomas refused to run on somebody else's **gasoline** (i.e., faith). Just because the others believed was not enough for Thomas to believe. This is based on the third statement of Thomas in John's Gospel.

**John** writes (**20:25**) - *"The other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' He said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails...I will not believe.'"*

Thomas understood you can't share anyone else's belief; each person must meet and embrace God for themselves – no one can do it for you.

People try to ride the faith of others: they worship together as a family on Sunday at church; they embrace the same values as their parents; they go through the motions as other church members. But that doesn't work for receiving eternal life; it doesn't work for having an intimate relationship with Jesus; it doesn't work for dealing with the doubts and crises of this life. It just doesn't work.

Thomas **verbalized** his doubts: *"Unless I see... I will not believe."* (**John 20:25**)

Sadly, church people like to pretend they're good ("I'm doing okay!") when they're hurting inside (physical ailments aside); when we hurt – and doubt is one of the greatest hurts – most people tend to keep quiet. No one wants anyone in a faith community to know they have doubts.

So people pay – counselors, spiritual directors, doctors - for the opportunity to verbalize their doubts, hurts, and concerns and have someone who cares, listen. Sadly, the church is seldom a safe place. More people are wounded in faith communities by friendly fire than enemy fire.

The reason for verbalizing doubts is not to get sympathy, it's trying to do something about one's doubts. The reason for asking questions is not to show off one's deep philosophical nature, it is to get answers. The reason people

take risks is not to display their courage; it is to embrace the God who loves us.

God doesn't like playing games. Jesus loves to answer honest questions, address honest doubts, and honor genuine risk. The church must too. God teaches that *"You will seek me and find Me, when you search for me with all your heart."* (**Jeremiah 29:13**)

## **TIMELINE**

**On Easter morning, Peter and John raced to the cemetery.** John was faster, but Peter was bolder. Peter entered the tomb and came out bewildered. John entered the tomb and came out believing (**20:8**).

**Believe** is one of John's favorite words. He uses it **88** times in his gospel! Twice as often as Matthew, Mark, and Luke combined. Notice how John comes to believe in the resurrection of Jesus:

In **John 20:5**, John **saw** the empty tomb; John **saw** the *"strips of linen cloth lying there"* (lit. *"still in their folds"*). In **John 20:7**; John **"saw the cloth that had been around Jesus' head, which was folded up..."** John saw and John believed. **"Seeing"** becomes **"believing"** for John.

**The evening of Jesus' resurrection, he appears to his disciples, blesses them, fills them with his Spirit, and commissions them to ministry.** Prior to his appearance in the Upper Room, there was still much uncertainty about his resurrection.

The women had seen Jesus, but the disciples didn't really believe them (**Luke 24:11**). They knew Jesus had made an appearance to Peter; but it was too good to be true (**Luke 24:34**). Two "disciples" who had walked with Jesus to Emmaus had run all the way back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples they had seen him (**Luke 24:35**).

And yet, when Jesus shows up in the upper room, they thought he was a ghost. Jesus *showed* them his **hands** and **feet**; they still didn't believe (**Luke 24:40-41**). Then Jesus *showed* them he could **eat**; then he *showed* them the **Scripture** that said Messiah would *"rise from the dead on the third day"* (**Luke 24:46**).

The disciples **saw** and **believed**. **Seeing** was **believing** for the disciples – except Thomas wasn't there.

**Maybe he was out for bagels; more likely, he had been so devastated when his Rabbi was crucified, he doubted he should still be a disciple...**

Commentators seize this opportunity to say that people, esp. leaders, need to show up at gatherings (meetings) of God's people (sadly, we no longer

understand what it means to be “in community” – we consider “community” something we “attend” – i.e., optional; rather than something we “comprise”).

Thomas missed the most important *church meeting* in history; but his absence is a gift to us so we can see how God continues to work - in our doubts, crises, and hurts and pain.

Even the disciples were all still afraid of Caiaphas’ henchmen; they remained together behind bolted doors even after Jesus had appeared! We’ve noted they were more “huddlers” than “witnesses” (and *missionaries*). But now, they had at least told Thomas. Change happens in small incremental steps.

It didn’t matter to Thomas that ten **other** sets of eyes had **seen** a resurrected Jesus or that the women who watched Jesus placed in a tomb had seen him appear. Let them shout and clap.

Thomas simply wanted to see with his own eyes – to see what all the other disciples had seen - before committing his life to someone again. Thomas would just sit and wait.

THE question of life and death is: Has Jesus really, **bodily**, in fact - not just as a devout **wish** or an ecstatic **vision** - been **raised** from the dead? Thomas understands that everything revolves around your answer to that question.

**The next Sunday (notice it is Sunday again!), Thomas was again **present** in community with his fellow disciples. The doors are still locked.**

**John** writes (20:27) – “*Jesus came [again] and stood among [in the middle of] them, and says, Shalom, alechem [“Peace be with you”].*” In the Greek, this is the kindest, most benevolent greeting anyone can offer; lit., “*all peace, in all ways, at all times.*”

Then Jesus **immediately** turns to Thomas. Here it comes...right? But Jesus doesn’t **scold** Thomas for his doubt; he doesn’t belittle him for his doubt; he doesn’t write him off for his doubt. Instead, Jesus offers him an opportunity to **examine** the **evidence**, to see the wounds in his hands and side.

If you believe there is no evidence for the Truth of the Christian faith, you believe a lie. Faith is built on fact! People say, “That’s just what you believe.” (The Greek word for that is, *Baloney!*) The Christian faith is open to investigation, scrutiny, **intense examination** – always has been – and will persevere because it is Truth.

What must have amazed Thomas is that Jesus answered exactly, precisely, totally and completely the question of Thomas when Thomas didn’t know Jesus even knew his question: “*Put your finger here, see my hands; reach out your hand and out it in my side.*” Examine the evidence!

And then Jesus says, “**Stop** being an unbeliever; **be a believer!**” And Thomas believes! This is the heart of John’s Gospel: **Be a believer!** The evidence is indisputable!

God does that over and over; one by one he shows up when we least expect him. He will do it for you. It may not be what you want, but it will be what you need. Jesus promises to meet us – not only in our faith but in our doubts, not with sweet pious platitudes, but with evidence. Just ask.

## TESTIMONY

**Thomas’ response is an amazing testimonial: “My **Lord** and my **God**” (John 20:28)**

The Hebrew word for *Lord* is **adon**, also meaning ruler, owner, or master. While *adon* means, ‘lord,’ **Adoni** is Hebrew for ‘My Lord.’ When used in reference to God, you can’t say *Lord*, you have to say, ‘My Lord.’ The only way to know God is to know him as your God. I.e., he is not just one who rules, he is the One who rules over me, and we have to obey/follow him.

But God’s name throughout Scripture is **Adonai** (i.e., *My Lord* in the plural; lit. Adonai means, “*My Lords*”). The one bearing the name *Adonai* is so great his name can’t contain it. Adonai is ‘My Lord’ with a multitude of exclamation points behind it. He is my **Lord!!!!**

No one just follows *Adonai*. We submit to him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength! We live our life in obedience with multiple exclamation points!!!!

**This is the only time in all four Gospels, Jesus is addressed as **God**!** For a Jew to make this kind of statement was **blasphemy**, a sin punishable by **death**.

But Thomas doesn’t care or hesitate. The proof is in; he will not be fooled again; *seeing is believing*. He needed to see for himself, as everyone does.

Thomas now knows what he needs to know: *egeiro*. “**He is risen!**” Jesus was dead and is now alive! Nothing else matters! Not religious rules; not even the threat of death!

Thomas knew only God could come back from the dead. Thomas knew only a God of love would come back for a doubter – and even if Thomas deserted, he knew God would still love him. Thomas’ confession crowns all the other gospel confessions. Thomas believes!



## TEACHING

Jesus welcomes an **honest examination** of the resurrection and Christianity. He knows it sounds almost too incredible and incomprehensible to believe. He knows faith (and trust) is not our native language.

Hesitant? You are still welcome. Cautious? You are welcome. (A lobotomy is not a pre-requisite for Christianity.) Jesus invites us to check it out!

Faith is not the **absence** of doubt. Faith is the willingness to **keep asking** the hard questions in the midst of doubt, to follow the best light you have about God and not quit, to keep putting one foot in front of the other in the worst crises of life.

The stone is **still** rolled back. The head cloth is still folded. The wrapping is still vacant. Jesus is **still** in middle of the room. Examine the evidence. Be a believer!

**Thomas will ultimately die for Christ.** Tradition, reliable sources, and common acceptance, indicate Thomas was a missionary in India from 52 to 72 AD. Thomas, like Mary and the disciples, had gone from *meeting* to *mission*...

He was confronted by a group of unbelievers who demanded he deny Christ. The one-time doubter responded, "*I will never, ever renounce Christ.*" They drove a stake through his body; he died a martyr. The "doubter" remained a faithful believer to the very end.

Thomas' believing led him to die for Jesus. "Doubting Thomas" gets a bad rap. Jesus told him, "*Well done, my good and faithful servant!*"

**Are you a casual, a convenient, or a committed believer?** Do you live for Jesus, or do you just need him around for fire insurance?

Being a disciple of Jesus means making him the Lord of your life, saying, my life exists for the sole purpose of glorifying God, saying "I surrender to 'My Lord and my God.'"

The Truth is, Jesus doesn't just give us evidence to consider, he gives us **himself**. (This is the magnificent fact of Christian apologetics.) Not only is the evidence here, but the One about whom the evidence speaks is also here – in the middle. Jesus comes. *In his time*, the preacher says, but he always comes.

Either our meeting with God thrusts us into mission, or we are just playing church. Because if the resurrection is true, it **demand**s our **whole life**. If you've met the risen Jesus, the only response is "*My Lord and My God*" with endless exclamation points.

**Now, as Jesus graciously reached out to Thomas, Jesus reaches out to all his believing and seeking readers and listeners: Be a Believer!**

The apostles became **believers** when they **saw** Jesus. All the rest of us believe based on the apostles' **teaching** and **testimony** – and a doubters' (Thomas) overwhelming affirmation helps our doubts. Does he really exist? Does he really care? Yes, he does.

Jesus honors all subsequent believers with a final gospel beatitude: ***Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*** Jesus blesses believers who have not had the privilege of a visual, aural, and tactile encounter with him; those for whom their ***believing*** is ***seeing***. How like the Gospel!

Prayer:

Father, thank you for raising Jesus from the dead – for comforting Mary in her distress, for offering peace to the panicked disciples and for meeting Thomas in his wonderings and doubts.

Father, we believe; please help our unbelief. We long to see Jesus. We long to spend more time meeting with Jesus that we might become more and more like him.

Father, now send us on mission into your world – to comfort those in distress, to bring peace to those who are anxious, to search with those who have doubts.

In the name of the Risen Christ, Amen.

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