

## **John 20:19-31**

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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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."

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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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."

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.\*

## **Believing without Seeing** - April 24, 2022

*John 20:19-31*

Let me say from the start that Thomas, the disciple who couldn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he saw him and touched his wounds, Thomas has gotten a bad rap over the centuries. What I mean is that the words "Doubting" and "Thomas" have been carelessly thrown together, creating this poor, confused character who has no grasp of the obvious.

We, from our vantage point of twenty centuries later, say, "Silly Thomas. Of course Jesus is alive. Of course Jesus defeated death. Of course Jesus' predictions about himself were all true! O Thomas, how could you be so close minded? Why, Thomas, why did you need proof?"

Strange thing, though, scripture doesn't tell us what Thomas' fellow disciples thought about Thomas and his need to meet Jesus face-to-face. Moreover, as we discussed last week, none of the disciples believed Jesus was alive, at least at first, on that Easter morning so long ago. Yes, all the disciples needed proof that the resurrection was real. It turns out that Thomas had nothing to be ashamed of back then because we are all like him. We all need proof that Jesus is alive.

In short, like Thomas, we are doubters and there is nothing wrong with that.

Now if you expect me, in today's message, to prove to you beyond any doubt that Jesus was resurrected to life on Easter and lives forever with God, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you. Words are important. This Sermon is important. But words are not enough.

On the other hand, believing that the resurrection happened is not as far-fetched as it might first appear. All Christians make the claim that the human being known as Jesus of Nazareth died brutally and innocently in the city of Jerusalem some 2000 years ago. He was buried in a nearby cave which was guarded by Roman soldiers. Then somehow, three days later, he was restored to life and appeared in bodily form to his followers on a number of occasions. According to the Bible, his resurrected body was both same and different. He could appear and disappear at will. He was hard to recognize at first. Yet, he also retained the wounds from his crucifixion, healed but still present. Jesus could eat and drink, and touch and be touched by his followers.

That, friends, is what we can glean from the Bible. We also later hear the story of the Apostle Paul, who, several years after Jesus, was active in persecuting the new Christian movement. He was on a road trip to Damascus when he reportedly encountered the risen Christ for himself and as a result of that powerful encounter renounced his persecution of the church and instead became its greatest evangelist. A major turn around.

Perhaps the problem with believing in the resurrection of Jesus is that it old news. It happened so long ago that we've just been taking it for granted. We come to church, we sing the songs, and check off the annual "Visit to God" box on our bucket list.

But let's think a bit, shall we? Let's think about those first disciples and what they experienced and ask the question what would we have done?

Let's keep in mind that in addition to the twelve disciples Jesus personally called, there were several dozen others, men and women, who followed Jesus all over Israel. Moreover, Jesus had friends and believers just about everywhere he went — there were many people who had heard of him and his message. How many? I can't say. However, what we can say is that the growth of the church after Jesus was explosive. Small communities of Jesus-followers popped up all over Israel. Obviously they would not have popped up unless a) people had been familiar with Jesus and his teachings in the first place and b) there was a source of leadership to guide these communities into being.

Now let's think about that. What does it take to be a leader? Leadership takes many forms, of course. And in the words of Shakespeare, "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them." Who would have thought that one of the great leaders of our century would be a Ukrainian comedian named Volodymyr Zelenskyy who now, as President of Ukraine, is reminding the world of what democracy and the price of freedom is all about?

Well, friends, Jesus' followers all had greatness thrust upon them. They had no idea what leading what quickly became a world-wide movement was about. But friends, what Zelenskyy teaches us today, what the disciples had back then, is that they knew and believed in what they were doing. And that certainly is the most essential requirement of leadership.

Zelenskyy believes in his nation of Ukraine. He believes in democracy. He chose not to run away but to stand with his people. The disciples of Jesus believed in the resurrected Christ. They believed they encountered him personally. They set forth from Jerusalem to organize the many pockets of Jesus' followers all over Israel. And like Zelenskyy, they risked their lives for a cause they totally believed in.

I was not there the first Easter Sunday. You were not there the first Easter Sunday. Even the people present on the first Easter Sunday didn't quite know how to understand what was happening to them at least at first. But within a few weeks, dozens, perhaps hundred of people became convinced, convinced in their heart of hearts that Jesus was alive. They believed beyond doubt and beyond fear that Jesus Christ had conquered death and therefore made the gateway to eternal life with God a reality for all people.

The early church was a terrible thing to be part of. The Jewish religious establishment in Israel did its best to break up the early Christian communities. They had no problem killing, beating, and harassing the early Christians. The Jewish leadership often succeeded in convincing Roman leaders that the Christians were against the Empire and even got Roman help in persecuting Christians and killing their leaders.

In short, who would want to be a Christian back then? Much less, who would want to be a Christian leader back then? Crazy, yes?

But to the Christian back then, the answer was Crazy, no! Why weren't those first Christians crazy for following Jesus? Why weren't those original disciples crazy for going forth and building Christian communities all over the world? It's obvious. They weren't crazy because they believed to the core of their being that the resurrection of Jesus was true. Each of those leaders, those disciples, those early followers knew very well that following Jesus was to risk danger, persecution, and even death. Yet even while knowing those facts in their rational minds, they chose the path of danger, persecution, and death because they knew the truth of Jesus and they could not keep silent about it.

Perhaps that is what is lacking in our day. Perhaps for us, the teachings of Jesus are just wishful thinking, some ideas that are useful in a philosophical debate but quite impractical for real life. Yes, Jesus, you have a very nice vision of how the future should be, but nothing worth risking my life for.

Is that what it is? Is the lack of passion for Christ we see in so many churches related to a belief that church is simply about going through the motions of worship, reading the same scriptures, singing the same songs, praying the same prayers over and over again — nothing ever changes. Will it?

Perhaps friends, you are right. Perhaps we are justified in our lack of passion to spread the gospel. Perhaps we are correct in our unwillingness to spread the good news. Perhaps it is best to sit on the sidelines and let someone else take on the thankless challenges and risks of spreading the gospel.

Or, perhaps what we need is to encounter God, each in our own way. And by encountering God, we too may be touched and transformed by the same fire which drove the first disciples out of their comfort zones, out of Jerusalem, and into the world to win the world for Jesus Christ!

Yes, I'm talking about encountering God. What the heck do I mean by that?

The disciples all saw Jesus in person. They heard him speak. They touched his body. They knew he was raised to a new life. It is certainly much easier to testify to the truth when you have experienced the truth for yourself.

So what about us? We who were not around? Well, Jesus made it clear for those back then and us today. Jesus gives all of us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God, God living in you, in me, in every single human being that has walked the planet. The Spirit is there, but many, believers and non-believers alike, don't want to recognize it.

Scripture makes is abundantly clear. What sustained and powered the early Christians to build the church and keep it going in spite of all the obstacles they encountered was that those early believers took the presence of the Holy Spirit seriously. They knew it in their minds, they felt it in their hearts, the experienced God in their souls. They knew Jesus was alive and that his message was true just like they knew the sun would rise in the morning. Pure, unadulterated, incontrovertible, truth.

So what, is the Holy Spirit on vacation now? Has it skipped this generation? Is it keeping quiet?

Certainly not. The Holy Spirit is alive, is with us, and is dwelling within every human being. Our problem is that we are not paying attention. The good news is that God is in touch with us, every one of us. God knows you and knows me and knows every human being.

By the Holy Spirit, God is reaching out to you. God is trying to get in touch with all of us, all of the time. I agree, it is sometimes difficult to know whether God is talking to you. It is sometimes difficult to know whether the thoughts that race through our minds are just random flashes or genuine encounters with our creator. I don't know.

And won't know, either, unless you want to. Just as we stick our fingers in our ears when we don't want to hear what's going on, we can just as easily stick spiritual fingers in our spiritual ears and keep God out of our lives. We can ignore, or we can hear only what we want to hear. We can easily refuse and reject the challenges God is posing to us. Later in this service we will see a video about a couple that did not ignore the Holy Spirit. They welcomed God in their lives and built a church.

Yes, we can be like Thomas and exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas was the first Christian to go to India. We can be like Paul, who became the apostle to the Gentiles. We can be like Peter and provide great leadership to the church. Or most importantly, we can be ourselves, finding and using the many gifts God has given to us, to actively, confidently, and truthfully go forth from this place to proclaim the greatest news of all: Jesus Christ is alive and loves you totally!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.