

Series: The Unfinished Business of Easter
#3: "Seeking Proof of an Empty Tomb"
John 20:19-29 (GNT)

This is such an odd season in all of our lives. I don't think we have ever been more concerned with purity and sanitation – and with good reason!

There have been some humorous memes going around Facebook to try to add some needed levity to the seriousness of the crisis we face. One says, "I've absorbed so much sanitizer and soap since this COVID-19 thing started, that every time I pee, it cleans the toilet." Another one says, "I've been following the instructions to wash my hands. I wonder when we can go back to taking a shower?"

There is a story about a boy who was the son of the pastor in a small town. One day, his mother told him that he should wash his hands because there were germs living in all that dirt. He refused, and complained, "Germs and Jesus! Germs and Jesus! That's all I ever hear around this house – and I've never seen either one!"

Thomas could easily have identified with the feelings of that precocious preacher's kid. Like that little boy, Thomas also had trouble believing in something he had never seen.

This morning, we are continuing our series of sermons on "The Unfinished Business of Easter." Every Sunday, we are looking at a different post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to one of his followers, and how the encounter impacted their faith in Christ.

You know, every one of us is different – and that was also true of those followers of Jesus who had to struggle to make sense of the resurrection. Some people are willing to take-on-faith that an unexplained thing is true, or are willing to accept the testimony of other people who claim that something is true. In our last two sermons that focused on Mark's original ending of his Gospel, and John's story of Mary Magdalene at the tomb, we see folks of each type.

But other people have to see the evidence to prove something is true. The last two congregations I pastored were both on the Space Coast – we had our share of engineers and others who had worked in the space industry – congregations filled with Thomases. And in truth, all of us can identify with Thomas. Simply because we live in a scientific age, we are all skeptics by nature. Maybe we are all from Missouri – we say "show me!" Anyway, if you are a critical-thinker, Thomas may speak for you, too.

Thomas was a skeptic by nature. He was a pessimist and a doubter. He was blunt – and honest – and straight forward. You always knew where you stood with Thomas. He was the kind of person who had to SEE something with his own two eyes before he would believe it. In short – he was a lot like many of us.

The passage we have read this morning is far-and-away the best-known story about Thomas, but he DOES appear in two other places in John's Gospel; stories which help us to see the character of Thomas a little better.

The first time we hear from Thomas is in the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. By this time, the Jewish leaders are plotting against Jesus, and Jesus retreats across the Jordan River to safety. Then

comes the word from Mary and Martha that their brother, Lazarus, was ill at their home near Jerusalem. And Jesus decides to go to him. And John tells us that Thomas is the one who spoke up and, true to his pessimistic skeptical nature, sighed, "Let us all go along with the teacher, that we may die with him." It's almost as if he had a premonition of the tragic days to come. He didn't lack courage – he loved Jesus enough to die with him. Thomas was just naturally pessimistic.

Then again, we hear from Thomas when Jesus is teaching his disciples in the Upper Room. Jesus tells them, "After I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to myself, so that you may be where I am. You know the way that leads to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way to get there?" And Jesus answered him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

Yes, Thomas was a skeptic who found it hard to believe. So, in a way, it's kind of ironic that, on the evening of Easter, when the Risen Christ appeared to the disciples who were in hiding from the authorities, huddled in the Upper Room. Thomas wasn't there.

The scriptures don't tell us where Thomas was – maybe he just had to go off and grieve alone – but when he returned, the others had unbelievable news! Jesus is alive! And he had come and stood right in their midst! And Thomas had missed it!

Yes, it is ironic that the one disciple who was the most skeptical, who found it the hardest to believe in Christ was the only one who hadn't seen him.

When Thomas heard the remarkable news, he must have been shocked. "It can't be true – people don't just rise from the dead!" And Jesus was dead! Maybe his friends were hallucinating – after all, they had all been under tremendous strain these past few days – maybe it was wishful thinking on their part. Or perhaps the others were playing some kind of cruel joke on Thomas – maybe to get even with him for deserting the group after the crucifixion.

No! Thomas would not take their word for it. Unless he could see with his own eyes, he would not believe.

Now, sometimes we are too hard on Thomas. True, he was a skeptic and a pessimist. True, he was slow to believe in the Resurrection. But he was a man of integrity. He wouldn't say he believed something unless he could say it with certainty.

In this way, I think Thomas is the most "modern" of all the disciples. Our modern 21st century minds are trained to look for "proof" beyond doubt. We question everything. We tend to have difficulty believing in anything we cannot see or comprehend. We live in an age of skepticism.

Yes, when Thomas says he refuses to believe without proof, he is speaking for us. If we were there, we would probably have said exactly the same thing. Because, if we're honest with ourselves and with each other, every one of us has to admit that, deep down in our souls, we, too, have some doubts about Jesus' resurrection. We are skeptics! We are Thomases! Even though we proclaim that we believe in the resurrection, we have some nagging questions in the back of our minds about whether it is really true, or not.

Did it really happen? Was Jesus raised from the dead? Is Jesus alive? Or is it all a lie – a hoax?

Yes, Thomas is speaking for us when he says that, unless we see it with our own eyes, we will not be convinced. Yes, we are “doubters,” too.

Of course, the Risen Christ understands Thomas’s doubts. But he didn’t leave him with his doubts. In the climax of the story, Jesus makes a second appearance a week later – this time to alleviate Thomas’s doubts.

So, what about our doubts? Is it a sin for us to have doubts about our faith? I’ve heard sermons preached on this text which have come to that conclusion – that, if you doubt, you are not really a Christian – that to doubt is a sin – and so we pretend that we don’t have any uncertainties about our faith (as if we could fool God).

But, of course, you can’t fool God. He can see into your heart. He knows that you have doubts – that your faith is not as strong as it should be. Yes, Jesus knew that Thomas had unresolved questions in his heart. And so, rather than condemning Thomas for his lack of faith, Jesus goes out of his way to help Thomas overcome his doubts. He returns to that same room a week later for the sole purpose of appearing to Thomas! Jesus, in compassion and love, went “the second mile” to resolve the restlessness in Thomas’ soul, so that Thomas might also believe.

The message we can learn from Thomas is this: It is normal to have doubts – it’s even healthy – so long as we are able to move beyond our doubts to faith.

Henry David Thoreau put it like this: “If I could not doubt, I should not believe.” Or as Tennyson wrote: “There is more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”

You see, when Thomas’ doubts were finally resolved, his faith was unshakable. Once Thomas saw the Risen Christ with his own eyes and touched the wounds of Christ with his own hands, his doubts vanished. All he could say was, “My Lord and my God!” He was completely convinced and totally committed to Christ.

No, Thomas had no more doubts. He knew in his heart that the Resurrection is true – that Jesus is alive – because he had seen him with his own eyes.

But you and I have not had the chance to see Jesus with our own eyes. Like Thomas, we weren’t there on that first Easter evening – and so we still have our doubts.

But there is another way to resolve the doubts – and that is by looking for Christ, not with human eyes, but with “the eyes of faith,” because ultimately, those are the only eyes that really matter.

St. Augustine, one of the great churchman of the early centuries, began his life with many doubts – with a restlessness of the soul. Yet, in later life, his faith became just as unshakable as Thomas’s faith. Thomas had seen Jesus with human eyes. But Augustine beheld Jesus with “the eyes of faith.” This is what he wrote: “Faith is to believe what you do not see, and the reward of faith is to see what you believe.” (repeat)

Or, as Jesus said, “Do you believe because you have seen me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me.”

My friends, can you believe? Can you overcome your doubts? Can you see with “the eyes of faith” and behold the Risen Christ standing in your midst this morning?

If so, then you can finally proclaim, along with Thomas: “My Lord and my God!”