

Be not faithless, but believing
John 20:24-31

When they finally saw Thomas, the rest of the disciples must have stumbled over themselves trying to relate the amazing news. “Where have you been? You’ll never believe it, but it happened, just like He said it would. Jesus is risen from the dead! We have all seen Him. He was right here in this room! He’s alive!” If you have ever had the opportunity to tell someone about an incredible event you have witnessed, you don’t have to imagine their excitement.

Normally, when we begin a story with “you’ll never believe it,” what we really mean to say is, “Now I know this is amazing, but it’s true.” How shocked the disciples must have been as Thomas threw a wet blanket on their enthusiasm: “You are right. I don’t believe it.”

Thomas’ skepticism is breathtaking. How could he not believe his closest friends, men with whom he had spent the best part of the past three years? Could he really believe they were lying to him? Or did he simply think they were suffering from a case of mass hysteria? But then again, weren’t they simply confirming what Jesus had already predicted would happen? How could he not believe?

Worse yet, Thomas didn’t simply say, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” He went on to make what must have seemed to him to be impossible demands. “I won’t believe until I see Him alive and touch Him. I won’t believe until He walks into this room alive still bearing the scars of His death.” How could Thomas say these things? And how could he expect his friends not to rebuke him for calling them at best crazy and at worst liars?

Perhaps the other ten were able to forgive Thomas because, after all, they had done the same thing. A week earlier, they had also refused to believe the reports of the women who came to tell them of the empty tomb. They had also dismissed Jesus’ own prediction of His resurrection. It was not until Jesus had appeared to them that they themselves had believed.

And do we really have any room to condemn the man we call “doubting Thomas?” Haven’t we also said, “I’ll believe it when I see it” when we think about God’s promises? Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have *it* more abundantly.” But when trouble or grief strikes, don’t we tend to say, “I’ll believe that abundant life stuff when I see it?” Jesus said, “My yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light.” But in the midst of our trials and temptations, don’t we tend to say, “I’ll believe that easy yoke stuff when I see it?”

Yes, how easy it is for us to doubt the resurrection in our own times of crisis. For when the going gets tough, don’t we all tend to say to Jesus, by our worries if not by our words, “Are you

really alive now? And are you really looking after me now? How can I believe that with all this grief and loss and loneliness and pain staring me in the face?”

Yes, even if we don't doubt the facts of the cross and resurrection, how easy it is to lapse into self-pity when things don't go as we want them to. How easy it is for us to say to Jesus, “Did you really die for me? Did you really let them drive nails into your hands and thrust a spear into your side for me? Do you really love me like you say you do?”

No, we can understand Thomas' doubts. In fact, we understand them all too well. So, at this point in the sermon, we would expect this sort of application: “Don't be a doubting Thomas. If God made promises to you, trust Him to carry them out. Have faith, and you will be saved!” I've heard sermons like this before, and so have you. You have probably heard them preached from this text. But for years I went away dissatisfied from sermons like that. I was told to have faith. But faith was precisely the thing I needed more of. How could I be expected to have faith when faith is what I didn't have?

And how can anyone be expected to have faith in Christ if Thomas doubted? Remember, Thomas walked with Jesus for three years. He saw Jesus walk on the water and calm the storm. He helped hand out the bread to thousands of people that Jesus multiplied from the five loaves. He was there when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. He had heard with his own ears Jesus' prophecy that He would rise from the grave after three days. And it was Thomas' best friends, people that he really trusted, that had told him that Jesus was alive. And so if Thomas, with all of his personal experience with Jesus, if Thomas didn't believe in the resurrection without seeing Christ, how can we somehow muster up faith in Christ on our own?

But if we look a bit more closely at the story of doubting Thomas, instead of despair we will find great comfort. For notice first that Jesus doesn't blame the ten for their inability to “convert” Thomas. Of course Jesus had sent them to tell the good news. But when confronted with their first doubter, who happened to be one of their best friends, they were unable to persuade him, until Jesus came into the room. How could they ever hope to persuade anyone else? And why couldn't they convince Thomas?

Because Jesus is the Great Persuader. There is nothing that you or I or anyone else can do to persuade someone of the good news if Jesus isn't first involved in changing their hearts. Yes, we are still responsible to go and tell. In fact, the last verse of the chapter says that's precisely the reason that John is writing his book: he wants people to read about Jesus and come to believe that He is the Messiah and the Son of God. But John's testimony will be useless to persuade an unbeliever unless Jesus first comes into the room.

What comfort this should give us when we try to share the gospel! For we are simply called to present the truth about Jesus in the best way we can. Now, make no mistake. We are called to give credibility to our words by also living according to the gospel. We are called to demonstrate the reality of the risen Christ through our deeds of love and mercy. But we are not responsible for the results – ultimately it is God’s job to save sinners. So go and tell people about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Show and share the love of Christ, but don’t be put off if people don’t believe you at first. They will believe when Jesus comes to them, just as He came to Thomas.

But while we tell the story with confidence, let us also tell it with compassion and patience. Let us not condemn those who do not believe. For we remember that when Jesus came into the upper room, he did not berate the unbelieving Thomas. In fact, he hadn’t rebuked any of the rest of the disciples a week earlier when they had also failed to believe in His resurrection.

Instead, in today’s passage we see that it is while Thomas is still doubtful and skeptical, perhaps even cynical, that Jesus comes to him. Jesus does not wait for Thomas to muster up faith. Instead, Jesus comes to the faithless one. Instead of condemning Thomas for his lack of faith, Jesus just comes into the room and gives Thomas exactly what Thomas needs to believe.

And unless Jesus does the same thing for us, unless Jesus comes to us and gives us faith, we won’t have it either. For you see, faith is not a precondition necessary for us to come to God. Faith is a blessing from God that He gives us after He has come to us. Just as He did for Thomas, it is still Jesus who reveals Himself to the faithless. It is still Jesus Who is the author as well as the finisher of our faith.

And what is the result of the faith that Christ gives to us? When Thomas sees Jesus, he not only believes that Jesus died and rose again. He not only sees his teacher and friend restored to him. Now he sees Jesus in a much fuller way, a much greater way. Thomas says to Jesus, “My Lord and my God.”

By saying these words, Thomas thus recognizes the new, much deeper relationship into which Jesus has called him. He had formerly followed Jesus as a student follows a teacher. After seeing the risen Christ, Thomas now submits himself completely to Jesus, confessing Him to be both Lord and God.

But this new relationship involves protection as well as submission. For Thomas now realizes that Christ is not only the God of creation, the God Who spoke the worlds into existence. He is also the God of Thomas. He recognizes that Jesus is not only the Lord, ruler and judge of

all the earth, but Thomas' Lord and protector. Thomas said that Jesus is his Lord and his God. And if you trust Jesus, He will be your Lord and God as well.

So how will this sermon end? With a reminder that we all need to have more faith? No, because that would simply push us toward spiritual navel-gazing, urging us to look inside ourselves, to wonder whether the doubts we have are great enough to call our salvation into question.

No, forget all that. Don't try to look inside yourself for assurance. Stop wondering if you have enough faith and stop trying to muster up faith within yourselves. Just trust Jesus. If you need faith, ask Jesus for it, and He will come to you and give it to you, just like He came to Thomas and gave him faith.

For what did Jesus say in our responsive reading this morning? "Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks will receive, and he who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to him who knocks." Jesus came to Thomas and gave him faith. How can we believe He won't come to us? How can we believe He won't answer our prayers?

For what else did Jesus say in our responsive reading? "As bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, the Father in heaven will give the Holy spirit to those who ask him!" If you come to Jesus, and if you ask Him to give you faith, if you ask Him to fill you with His Holy Spirit, He has promised to do that. If you come to Jesus, He has promised that He will not turn you away. You can trust a promise like that.

And notice that Jesus announces a blessing on those of us who do come to Him in this way: "Thomas, because you have seen me, you have believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

Trust Jesus Christ, the Son of God and He will be your God. Trust Jesus Christ, the Lord of all the earth and He will be your Lord. Trust Jesus and you will be truly blessed.

So, do you want more faith? Don't look inside yourself. Do what Thomas did. Look to Jesus. Remember the nails that tore His hands as He paid the price for the sins of all His people. Remember the gash in His side, made by a soldier's spear. Remember that He endured all that pain and torment, all that suffering and death, remember that He laid down His life for all who would trust in Him. And remember that He is alive, and that He has promised to bless all those who come to Him. Don't doubt His love anymore. Don't doubt His promises anymore, but believe. Know that your loving Lord is alive, and trust Him.