

## **“How Can I Know?”**

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday evening, (maybe some of you saw it), the first episode of a new mini-series aired on NBC. Titled, “A. D.: The Bible Continues”, it’s a series that begins with the death and resurrection of Jesus and continues (for ten weeks), documenting the way in which the church began and developed in those early years following the events of that first Easter. The basis for the series is the book of Acts and a number of letters of the apostle Paul.

Mary and I watched the opening episode. We were both pleasantly pleased and encouraged, not only by its faithfulness to the scriptures, but also by the very fact that it was on television. Living in a culture, as we do today, skeptical about so many of the claims of the Christian faith, if nothing else, it provides a platform for conversation to happen and a possibility for faith formation to begin.

One of the questions arising from (almost any) honest reading of the Bible and, most likely, from this mini-series is the basic question of whether or not it all happened. “How can I know if what the Bible tells us is true? How can I know if the stories of Jesus’ resurrection and his appearing to the disciples are real? Bottom line: How can I know if Jesus is really alive and if I can and should (in fact) place my faith and trust in him? How do I know? How can I know?”

Have you ever heard the word “epistemology”? It’s not a term we use every day. It’s not a disease. It doesn’t refer to the epistles of Paul. It’s a word used in philosophy. It has to do (as the dictionary defines it), with “the method and grounds of knowledge, especially with reference to its limits and validity.” It’s the science of how one comes to know something. It’s not as simple as it might seem, but it’s very important. How do you know something is true?

How do I know (for example) there was a George Washington? I never saw him. Maybe some of you did, but I never did. It’s a part of our history. There’s enough evidence, so I believe it. How do I know an aspirin can help a headache? Not only because I’ve read it, but I’ve tried it and it works. Those things are simple.

What about things like love, or happiness, or peace of mind; what about faith or assurance or trust? You can’t put those things in a test tube and prove them. You can’t touch them or see them. They’re realities, nonetheless.

For most of us, (as result), because things aren’t always so clear (simple to figure out), we fall somewhere in the middle of being too skeptical (on the one hand), and too gullible (on the other). A true skeptic would demand proof before accepting anything as being true. A true gullible would trust (and fall) for almost everything being true. Those are the extremes. Most of us (thankfully) are somewhere in between.

In religion, (and when it comes to faith) those two extremes are not only relevant, but also dangerous. A skeptic takes the stance that one can never really know what’s true and what isn’t. The argument goes something like: “If it’s true for you, that’s fine with me. But don’t expect your truth to become my truth.” (That’s often the position taken by the skeptic.) At best, it’s very shaky reasoning and (even worse) extremely poor theology.

The other, and that’s the person who’s too gullible, theirs is the position that they believe everything. Jesus rose from the dead. (They believe it.) Every religion is the same. (They believe that, too.) The trouble is that everything can’t be true, it isn’t true. How do we know? How can I know?

And so we come to our text, to the story of that first Sunday night, Jesus’ appearance to the disciples in the upper room, and to the follow-up story on the following Sunday when Thomas, who was not there on that first Sunday (and had a hard time believing), was there the following week and came to believe.

Let’s talk (for a moment) about Thomas. It’s interesting, if you go through the gospels, that in the first three (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) we’re told almost nothing about him. His name is listed (among the twelve), but that’s all we get. Only in John’s gospel does his “personality” (if you will) actually come into play. Even there, there are only a few places where he’s mentioned.

The most familiar is the one we read today; the story of his so-called doubts. What's interesting is that the other disciples, until they saw Jesus, had the same doubts. Remember that first Sunday night? What were they doing? They were hiding. The doors were locked out of fear. We remember Thomas as the one with doubts, but he was not the only one. They all had doubts. So do I. So do you.

What's also interesting, is that (this same Thomas), the one with doubts, also was a man of deep faith. Earlier in the gospels, when Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem (and began his journey to the cross), the disciples thought it would be certain death. Surprisingly, it was Thomas who said, "Then let us go with him, so we may die with him." If that's not a statement of faith, I'm not sure what is.

What's even more interesting is that this same Thomas, the one who was ready to die (with Jesus), who had a hard time believing in the resurrection (of Jesus), also made the most powerful confession in all the gospels (about Jesus).

In our text today, he said, "My Lord, and my God." (That's what he said.) Not Teacher. Not Rabbi. Not Messiah. Not Healer. But God! It is the only place (in the gospels) where Jesus is called God without qualification. It's spoken with absolute conviction, as if Thomas was simply recognizing a fact. You are my Lord and my God! That's what he said; certainly not the words of a doubter.

And so what do we make of this? What are the take-aways from this story of two Sunday nights? How can we know if this Easter event really happened? (There are a number of lessons we could mention.) On this day when nine of our young people will be confirming their faith in the Triune God, let's focus on just three, one for each of the three persons in the Trinity.

How can we be sure? (How can I know?) Here's the first. I can know because of the presence of Jesus. I can know because of the presence of Jesus.

If you were to go through those post-resurrection appearances, you'd find at least ten times when Jesus appeared during those 40 days prior to his ascension; at least ten times when he appeared to his disciples. He ate with them. He talked with them. He prayed with them. He showed them his hands and his side. He was alive. He'd been raised.

That was good news. The disciples needed to know that. We need to know that. The empty tomb, by itself, without the person of Jesus, and who knows what happened? (All of a sudden it's a mystery.) All of those questions were circulating. Did someone steal the body? Was this a plot among the disciples to make it appear as if it were true, when it really wasn't? Was it a hoax? Was it a scam? Did those followers (of Jesus) who had given him their all, make it all up?

Apart from the presence of Jesus, we'd never know. Apart from the appearance of Christ, we couldn't be sure.

That was the question of Thomas. I need proof. I need evidence. I need to know: his hands, his feet. I need to see and to touch. Jesus gave him that proof. He showed him what he needed to see.

How do we know? We can't see him. We can't touch him. His hands and his feet, is he still alive? Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." (That's us.)

How does that work? Think about what he said. "Where two or three are gathered," that's where we find Jesus. In the family, among believers, in this body of Christ we call the Church.

People say, "I've never seen him. How can I be sure?" I've never come face-to-face, how can I know? (And then they stay away.) They stop coming. They don't read their Bibles. They forget to pray. They get out of the habit of (being here on Sundays) and they can't figure out why there's so much doubt.

Don't ever doubt your faith when you're faced with doubt. Doubts are part of the deal. The disciples had them. I have them. We all have them. But here's the deal. If you stay away from where you'll find Jesus, you'll have a hard time seeing Jesus. If you stay where he is, (where's he's promised to show up) and to be, it won't be so hard.

Don't make it so hard. He's here. He's alive. He's with us, even now. I can know because of the presence of Jesus.

I can also know because of the promise of the Father. I can also know because of the promise of the Father.

It's an incredible thing about the Bible, about the promises God makes. Every one of his promises has come true. Every one of the promises God has made has been fulfilled.

Now, most often, when we think about things being fulfilled, we talk about them as prophecies. The Old Testament is filled with prophecies about Jesus. The Bible is filled with prophecies about the things God has said. Every one of those prophecies has been fulfilled. Every one of the promises God has made has come true.

In today's story, (Jesus said), "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Not long after, he said, "Stay in Jerusalem...wait for the promise of the Father...in just a few days (he told them), you'll be given the Holy Spirit." (We'll get to that in a moment.)

When it comes to being sure, certain this was all true, (Jesus says) you can base your conclusion on the promise of the Father. You can build your life on the fact that what God has promised will come to pass.

Now, I don't want to get too far off topic, but if God had not promised that one day we'd be in heaven, I'd have all kinds of doubts. If God had not promised that (in Jesus) all of our sins are washed away, I wouldn't know where to turn. If God had not promised that what we're doing (right now) is worth doing, who we're following (each day) is worth following, I don't know if I would. But he has, and so we are, and he is, and that's why we're here.

Again, don't make following Jesus harder than it needs to be. Build your life on what God has promised. Base your faith on what God has told you is true. If God said it, it'll come to pass. If God promised it, there's no reason to doubt.

I can know because of the presence of Jesus, because of the promise of the Father, and because of the power of the Spirit.

Jesus said, "Peace be with you." (It says) "He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'" It says, "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."

The next week, it was the same thing, only (this time) Thomas was there. Again, Jesus said, "Peace be with you." It says he showed him his hands and his side. (He said), "Stop doubting and believe!" (And that's when Thomas said), "My Lord and my God!"

The gift of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus, the promise of the Father. Add those up, (apply them in life), and do you know what you have? You have a disciple of Jesus. You have a follower of Christ.

It's the power of the Holy Spirit that makes it happen. It's the means through which God has chosen to work. Through his Word, whenever it's heard or read or shared, God promises that his Spirit will be at work to create faith. Through the sacraments, when a person is baptized, when we share the Lord's Supper, these are the means through which faith is given and continues to grow.

Does it just happen? Not without the Spirit. Does it all of a sudden become real? Not without the promise of God and the presence of Christ. But when (those three) come together, his presence, his promise, and his Spirit, (and when they're taken and applied in life), there's no limit to the faith and the future of the one who places their trust in Christ.

Today, nine of our young men and women will be confirming their faith in the Triune God. They'll be standing right here and publicly confessing what they have come to know to be true.

You and I have never seen Jesus. We've never had the luxury of being able to touch his hands and his side. What we have is all we need. Who we have is all that matters.

The presence of Jesus, the promise of the Father, the power of the Spirit. "Blessed are those (Jesus said) who have not seen and yet have believed." That's us. Amen.