

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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John 20:19 - 31

"I Won't Believe Unless I See"

It's the week after Jesus' resurrection, so *you* know what day it is. It's Doubting Thomas Sunday! If you've been around the church for very long, you know about Doubting Thomas Sunday. On DTS, the same story is told over and over again, the same Sunday after Easter Sunday. I haven't been a pastor for long, and this is already the *third* time I've preached on this story! Since this is likely *not* the first time *you've* heard this story, you can probably nod off and not miss anything too important.

In John 20, Jesus tells Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn 20:29b). *And cursed are those who need to see in order to believe.* (pause) Ok, so that's not what Jesus says. He just says that first line, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn 20:29b).

It's interesting that we seem to naturally insert the words into this text: *And cursed are those who need to see in order to believe.* Every time we hear the story of "doubting Thomas," it seems to be the same old story: Don't be like that guy Thomas, because you'll get a lame nickname for 2,000 years. Just believe, like the other disciples, and you will be a *strong* Christian. Weak Christians (like Thomas), doubt, but strong Christians believe without needing evidence.

It's fascinating that this is our typical takeaway, because the writer of John doesn't write that Thomas had a weaker faith than anyone. In John 20, *Mary Magdalene* didn't believe until she saw Jesus and heard him call her name. One of Jesus' *closest disciples* didn't believe until he saw the grave clothes and the empty

tomb. Jesus' *other close disciples* didn't believe until Jesus appeared to them, spoke to them, and showed them his hands and his side. Jesus didn't tell Mary or his other disciples that they had a weak or insufficient faith because they needed evidence. Yet, we are often told that Thomas is *unusual* or has insufficient faith, because he needs to see Jesus in-the-flesh with the scars of his crucifixion in order to believe that Jesus has risen from the dead.

Thomas needs proof, just like the other disciples, and what does Jesus do? Without hesitation, Jesus *gives* him proof. He shows up and speaks right to Thomas' doubt. Thomas says that he won't believe unless he sees and touches Jesus' wounds, so Jesus appears to Thomas and says, *Go for it. Touch my wounds. It's me.*

Jesus is undeterred by Thomas' need for evidence, and so is the author of John. At the end of chapter 20, John writes that Jesus performs *many* signs, and writes in verse 20, "These [signs] are written *so that* you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John includes signs, or evidence, in his Gospel *so that* you and I may believe.

There is an unfortunately common notion that faith is the *absence of evidence*. Faith can't really be measured, so evidence has been relegated to science. Anything that utilizes the scientific method, such as asking questions, presenting challenges, and requiring evidence are considered irrelevant and even negative.

How often have you heard someone commending another person's faith because they never asked the question, "Why?" I can't *tell* you how often I have heard this. *Look at the hardship that person is enduring, and they never even asked*

God, “Why?” The lack of questioning God is seen as proof of a strong faith. Yet, Scripture never commends avoiding questions like “Why?”

The Psalms, in contrast, show questions and challenges as *models* for prayer. Psalm 2:1, “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?” Psalm 10:1, “Why, O LORD, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” Psalm 13:1 – 2, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?” Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?”

For Christians, Hebrews 11:1 is often a verse quoted to define faith. It says, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” I encourage you to turn to Hebrews 11:1. Does this verse say, “Faith is a lack of evidence” or “faith *without* evidence is better than faith *with* evidence”? No, it says, “Faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen.” How are we assured of what we hope for and convicted of what we don’t see without evidence?

We need evidence! And this is exactly why John says that he writes, to tell us of the signs of Jesus, so that we may believe. As Christians in the twenty-first century, we do not have the luxury of seeing Jesus’ risen and scarred body firsthand, as the disciples did. We require other evidences of Jesus, and so we look to the historical evidence of eyewitnesses and others who recorded Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection; we look to the historical evidence of non-Christians who wrote about this man named Jesus and the subsequent rise of the Church; we look to the

historical evidence of Christians for 2,000 years after Jesus; we look to the evidence of the life of believers around us; and we look to the evidence of God's Spirit in and among us.

As Christians, we do not have an immaterial faith; we believe in a God who acts in the world and who has chosen to *come* to us *in history*. We believe in a God who came in the flesh into human history, who lived and died and rose from the dead. We believe in a God who continues to be active in the world, though we can't see Him. We believe this because of the witnesses who have come before us and because of the conviction of God's Spirit within us.

Having faith in a God you cannot see who is active in the world is no simple thing. To have faith requires *compelling* and *constant* evidence. This is why it is so critical that we *look* for evidence in our lives and that we continue to *hear* from other Christians.

I would like to encourage you with a word *I* once received from a friend. I had recently returned from teaching English overseas, and I struggled with my place in the world and with my faith. Was God even hearing me? It sure seemed that if He heard me, He didn't want to respond. When I lamented this my friend, I thought that she would console me, but she instead said, "If you can't hear God, listen for God in other people's stories." *If you can't hear God, listen for God in other people's stories.*

Today, I would like you to listen for God in Tim's story.

(Play Tim's video)

You and I are limited human beings who need evidence, as Thomas did. The good news is that your limitations do not limit God. Your questions, your challenges,

and demands for evidence do not deter Him. Your questions, challenges, and demands may instead be opportunities for God to reveal Himself to you, as with Thomas. God *wants* to be known by you and *will* reveal Himself to you when you seek Him with all your heart (Jer 29:13). Amen.