

Believing Without Seeing

John 20:19-31

One of the icebreakers we sometimes do at the beginning of the year involves sitting around in a circle, passing a ball around, and saying everyone's name as they get the ball. One of the variations is that each person can add an adjective before their name that begins with the same letter their name does. So we get to meet Marvelous Matt, Smart Sam, Energetic Ethan, or Daring Dave.

Most of the time, students use positive adjectives. Every so often, someone uses one that's more neutral, or has both positive and negative connotations. Sassy Sarah, or Reserved Rachel, or Loud Luke. More rare is the student who uses a negative adjective, Moody Megan or Dull Dan.

Thomas probably wouldn't have chosen "doubting" for his adjective when he did icebreakers with the disciples, although doubting Didymus at least follows the alliteration rule in English. But that's what he ended up being remembered for. We don't talk about "Denying Peter" or "Absent Andrew" or run away naked Mark. The only other disciple who gets that kind of name is traitor Judas.

Our Gospel lesson is famous for being the story of "doubting Thomas," but the rest of the disciples aren't much better. They were hiding in the locked room, trying to make sense of what the women had told them about the empty tomb, and what Peter and John had seen when they went there, until Jesus shows up. They didn't seem to truly believe Jesus had risen from the dead until they had seen Him in the flesh. They didn't believe without seeing.

Thomas, though, doesn't get to see that first appearance. So when he was told of Jesus' appearance to the other disciples, Thomas answered defiantly, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe". He won't believe without seeing.

Eight days later, they are still in the same locked room, waiting for Jesus to come to them. Jesus had overcome sin and death, but the same powers that be that sentenced him to death were still the powers that be that threatened the disciples. And so they hid behind locked

doors. This time Thomas is with them, waiting to see what will happen, waiting to see if he can believe again.

Jesus didn't leave Thomas in his doubts. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples again and said to them, "Peace be with you," calming their fears. More than that, then Jesus turned to Thomas with outstretched arms and said, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but *believe*."

Martin Luther believes this is the lesson of the Thomas episode. "We may learn how Christ loves us, and how amiably, fatherly, gently, and mildly he deals with us and would deal with us.... He does not desire to overturn or reject the weak in faith, but bears patiently with their weakness, not snarling at them frightfully, but handling them gently and respectfully."

Thomas sees the risen Jesus for himself. But it's not just the seeing that lets him believe. It's the words of Jesus that let him believe. It's the years he spent following Jesus. It's the testimony of the other disciples and the women who prepared him for this moment.

Seeing signs doesn't guarantee belief. The Roman guards saw the empty tomb, but that didn't make them believe Jesus was the Son of God. The priests knew the tomb was empty, but they don't seem to believe they killed the Son of God. They see, but don't believe.

We see that throughout Jesus' ministry. Jesus gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and makes the lame walk, but that doesn't seem to make others believe in who he is. After feeding the 5000, the people follow him because he's fed them, but when he starts talking about eating his body, the crowds leave. They've seen, but don't believe.

Jesus comes again, entering into the locked room, so that he can open the doors and send the disciples out. They become not just disciples, students, but instead become apostles, the ones sent out into the world to share the good news, the news of the risen Christ.

We all have trouble believing sometimes. We all have friends or family or neighbors who have trouble believing. As much as we might wish Jesus would

come to us like he came to Thomas so we can show them and they can believe, that's not how it works. Instead, we have to believe without seeing.

We have more than the disciples had, though. While they had the risen Christ there with them, we have their descriptions of what they saw. We have the evidence of how their lives were changed. We have the written word of God that tells us about who Jesus is, what Jesus did for us, and what it means. As John writes, "These things 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." We have the Holy Spirit who Jesus sent after his ascension. We may not see, but we can believe, and share what we believe.

Charles Colson served as special counsel for President Richard Nixon, and was convicted of obstruction of justice for his role in the Watergate incident that led to the end of Richard Nixon's presidency. His time in prison changed him, and he started Prison Fellowship, a Christian organization that ministers to prisoners. He said that his experience convinced him of the truth of the resurrection.

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Everyone was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely."

We get to believe without seeing. We have the testimony of the disciples. We have the Bible that tells us of what they did in the immediate aftermath of Easter, and we have the extra biblical stories of how they remained faithful even to the point of death. Tradition tells us Thomas made it to India and was martyred there, killed for sharing what he had seen and believed. Most stories about his martyrdom tell us he was even killed with a spear, receiving the same mark in his side that he saw in his risen Lord.

Even though we don't get to see Jesus the same way Thomas and the other disciples did, we believe. We

believe in the one who came to doubting Thomas after his resurrection and showed the holes in his hands and side. We believe in the one who sacrificed everything for us. We believe because of what Thomas and John and the other disciples saw and wrote. We believe without seeing, and have life in the name of Jesus. How wonderful to be called believing!

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