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John 20:24-31
Doubting Our Doubts
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Thomas saw the risen Christ with his own eyes, and then he said, "My Lord and my God." But Jesus replied, "Blessed are those who believe without seeing." Why is that? Why is it more blessed to believe without getting to see for ourselves?

Imagination was not Thomas' best quality. He was a realist. He believed in what he saw, in what he could prove, in the empirical evidence. So it is not surprising that he had a rough time with metaphors and symbols. When Jesus spoke in parables, it drove Thomas nuts. We can just see him looking at the other disciples asking, "Did you get that? I never know what he is talking about. What's with all of these stories and riddles? Why can't Jesus just say what he means?" At the Last Supper, Jesus told his disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you, and you know the way where I am going." We can imagine most of the disciples trying to look thoughtful and saying, "Yes, yes." But not Thomas. According to John's gospel Thomas says, "Jesus, we don't even know where you are going. How can we possibly know the way?"

The next day the way Jesus was going became painfully clear. Thomas knew that his Lord's hands were nailed to a cross and his Lord's side was split with a spear. He knew the man he had been following the last three years was dead. That is what the evidence proved.

So when Thomas hears from the other disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead it is only natural for him to say, "What are you talking about? Oh, I know, this is another metaphor. You've got to mean in some symbolic way Jesus is still with us. Well, that is not good enough for me. That could never happen. Not really. Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my hand in his side, I will not believe."

I do not believe. As a pastor I hear those words a lot. "I do not believe I will ever be in love again. Not after what I went through in the last relationship. Not at my age." "I do not believe I will ever be healthy. Not after what the doctor told me." "I do not believe that peace will ever come to Israel, Palestine, or Iraq." "I do not believe that the city of Pittsburgh will ever recover financially." "I do not believe that we will ever make a real difference in the inner city neighborhoods."

Remember that there was a day, not long ago, when some of us said: "I do not believe peace will ever come to Northern Ireland or Bosnia." "I do not believe the Berlin Wall will ever come down." Before that some said: "I do not believe that black and white children will ever attend the same schools." "I do not believe that humans will walk on the moon." "I do not believe that they

will invent a vaccine for polio.” The world is constantly doing things that are unbelievable.

As we confront the crises of our day: AIDS, drugs, violence in the Middle East and on our own city streets, the continuing struggle with racism, and as you confront the crises of your own life, you have to decide if you are going to be a believer in a better future or not. The luxury of being a non-believer and a doubter about the future is that then you don't have to worry about caring for the poor or even praying “thy Kingdom come” on Sundays. And if you do not believe change is possible in your own life, then you don't have to worry about making those changes. You can forget about exercise, dieting, or trying again at relationships or the new job. Rather than trying again you can just wrap yourself in your comfortable despair, entertain yourself into a coma, and not bother with things like dreams and vision. Doubt is easy. It is believing that requires a lot of work.

As Thomas would remind us, however, belief has to have its reasons. If you are going to believe in change and work for that goal, then the basis of your belief has to be more than wishful thinking. Here is the church's reason for believing, and thus working, for a better tomorrow - Jesus Christ really is risen from the dead.

On Easter we were not celebrating the perseverance of the human spirit, or the spirit of Christ that lived on in the hearts of his disciples after he died. That wasn't good enough for Thomas and it shouldn't be good enough for you. If that is all Easter was about, then we may as well all join Pilate in washing our hands of the whole thing.

Easter is not a metaphor. It cannot be. Thomas was right to have his doubts about that. All four of the gospel writers agree that Jesus physically, literally, really, rose from the dead. If you were there when he appeared in the upper room, you could put your finger in the nail marks on his hand and your hand in the wound in his side. That is how real the resurrection was.

This is central to everything else the Bible claims. In the words of the Apostle Paul, if Christ was not risen from the dead, then everything else we believe is in vain. We would have to close the doors of the church because we would have nothing to say to the world. Why? Because our only reason for having hope and thus continuing to work for tomorrow is that the Savior is alive. He has ascended to the right hand of the Father, and through the Holy Spirit he is continuing his work of salvation and will not stop until the Kingdom of God does come to earth. He is not done with his work in the nations of the world. He is not done with his good work in your life either. And if you believe that, then you have every reason to keep working as well.

Robert Coles, the great child psychiatrist, followed the lives of some black six year old children in New Orleans in 1961. These children were under a court order to participate in the desegregation of the public schools. Every day as they went to school they encountered angry protesters who taunted the children and called them terrible names. It took the National Guard just to get the kids inside the doors of their school. One of these six year olds, a little girl named Tessie, had about had her fill of being yelled at by angry adults. So one morning she told her grandmother that she was feeling sick and wanted to stay home. Her wise grandmother said,

“It’s no picnic, child - I know that, Tessie. . . Lord Almighty, if I could just go with you and call all those people to my side, and read to them from the Bible, and remind them that he’s up there, Jesus, watching over all of us. Lord, I pray for them, those poor, poor folks who are out there shouting their heads off at you. You’re one of the Lord’s people; he’s put his hand on you. He’s given a call to you, a call to service in his name.”

Tessie decided that maybe she was feeling well enough to go to school after all.

His hands are on you too. They still bear the marks of the nail prints from the cross, where he was dying to give your life a sacred purpose again. Until you see that, you will never feel well enough to continue your hard work in life. Yes, but how exactly do you see that? We were not in the upper room. We did not see what Thomas saw and have no proof that Jesus was risen. No, we see only by faith.

Faith is not a proof or an explanation, and no amount of evidence can give it to you. Neither is faith an emotion, something you feel, or a matter of the heart. Faith is a choice. It’s a matter of the will. It is a choice that arises in the midst of your doubts, and in spite of the doubts. As a choice it is available to all, but it will completely re-orient the life of anyone who chooses to believe. And that makes faith more powerful than a proof.

Actually, we do not have proof about anything that really matters to us. In the words of Frederick Buechner, “Can I prove that life is better than death, or that love is better than hate? Can I prove the greatness of the great or the beauty of the beautiful? Can I prove the friendship of my friend? When I experience it, I don’t need to prove it and when I don’t experience it, no proof will do.”

Have you ever tried to prove that you love someone? It just drives you crazy and does a remarkable amount of damage to the relationship. Some things only come alive by faith. That is exactly why Jesus told Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” He said that because not seeing with the eye allows us to see with faith. As in any important relationship, only faith allows you to enjoy the love of God at work in your life.

If you believe it, you will see it. And if you have seen the work of the risen Christ in your life, then you can join Tessie — and every other ordinary saint who has gone before you — in doubting your doubts and getting on with what you are called to do with life. Amen.