

John 20:19-31

Easter 3, April 23, 2023
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On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." ²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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." ²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these 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.

A few years ago, I received a call from an older lady in Winter Haven who needed help with some things, and I offered to come by with a bag of groceries as long as I could sit down and talk with her and share a devotion. She accepted, and after sitting down with her and sharing some Scripture, she offered to share with me a drink of what she called a "miracle in a bottle." I can't remember what it was called, but when she handed the bottle to me to look at, I found some amazing claims on the label. I was holding in my hand a beverage that claimed to cure cancer, relieve blindness, cure diabetes, and cure arthritis among a number of other long-term disorders. Perhaps it's needless to say, I didn't take a drink. I was a bit of a skeptic that day. I looked at the lady, knowing that she was suffering through a number of long-term health problems, and I asked if she was drinking it. "Everyday," was the answer. And that was all I needed to know that these were outlandish claims.

For me that day, "Seeing was believing," or rather, a lack of seeing meant a lack of believing. In some areas of life, this skeptical approach can be beneficial and rather prudent. It keeps us from being taken in by outrageous advertising claims or from being robbed through any e-mails or phone calls that promise us millions of dollars if we can just provide a few simple answers. Yes, in these areas, a bit of skepticism is necessary. But we can take this "Seeing is Believing" approach too far, especially when it extends to things religious, as well. According to a 2020 Gallup poll, only 48% of Americans now are even members of a church, that number dropping below 50% for the first time ever. It's pretty clear, for most people, skepticism is the approach to God as well. What about us? We're here in the pews at least, but we too struggle with skepticism in this area. We have doubts about God, doubts about His will for our lives, doubts about His authority. And clearly, such skepticism interferes with our faith. Thankfully, our Savior knows our doubts, and He comes to us with the only cure to our skepticism. Our theme today is not:

~~"Seeing is Believing"~~ (but rather) **"Believing is Seeing"**

But before we get to the actual theme, let's first consider that idea of "Seeing is Believing" and follow that line of thought to discover where it would leave us. In our text, Thomas exhibits this type of

attitude: ***“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.”*** What’s wrong with insisting on *seeing* something before we accept it? Well, again, *in* this life and *for* this life, a healthy dose of skepticism is often a good thing. If you’re buying a car or a home, if you’re casting a vote in an election, it’s good to do the research and see whether the claims are backed up with actual truth.

But what happens when we apply this mindset to the ultimate questions about the meaning of human life? “Why am I here? What is my purpose?” What do we *see* when we look for answers to questions like these? In regard to such questions, we don’t see very well. Consider Thomas. After Jesus’ resurrection, He was sticking stubbornly to what his eyes told him. What was the last thing he’d seen? Jesus arrested, crucified, and buried. And even after hearing the good news from the Mary’s, from the Emmaus disciples, from the other 10 Apostles, Thomas decided to stick with what he’d seen, that Jesus was in the grave. He was holding onto death instead of life. And if we evaluate the big questions in life only through what we can *see*, we’re stuck with the same: only death.

You know, we live in a death-denying society. Every advancement in healthcare is made for the sake of avoiding death. Every safety improvement to vehicles is developed to avoid deaths. Home security systems, traffic lights, law enforcement, militaries—all to aid in avoiding death. That’s what we want! To avoid death—we don’t want to see it, we don’t want to deal with it, we don’t want to confront it. But we really cannot avoid it. In spite of the best efforts of science and medicine and engineering, death is the ultimate reality for each of us—and every human knows it. Rich and poor, young and old, famous and ordinary, and yes, you and I—we all will die sooner or later. So, if we are honest and open about the meaning of human existence on the basis of what we *see*—that is, only *death*—then we have to say: there is no meaning to any of it. No meaning, no purpose, no significance, because it all just ends in death. Not only will *you* never be able to witness the great things you’ve accomplished in life, whatever good you’ve done, eventually, everyone else will forget too. And then they’ll all die, and then what good will anybody’s anything do for anyone? It’s all meaningless.

If “Seeing is Believing,” that is, if our hope and confidence are based only on what we experience, and what we experience is only death, then our lives are pointless. We are empty, we are without hope, and we are without God in a cruel, dying world. But thanks be to God, Christ IS risen! And He proved it to Doubting Thomas. Jesus showed him His hands and His side, and, seeing, Thomas believed. And Jesus replied, ***“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*** “Seeing is NOT Believing,” Jesus says, rather “Believing is Seeing.”

Now, I will say that I can empathize with Thomas, and perhaps you can too. He was all alone. Can you imagine what this must have felt like for Thomas hearing all his friends tell him the story about how they had seen the resurrected Lord! The two Mary’s had gone to the tomb and seen the angels! Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene! They ran and told the disciples, who themselves were a bit skeptical at first. In fact, this was something that Peter and John needed to see to believe, they ran to the tomb to check it out with their own eyes. They didn’t see their risen Lord, but they also didn’t see His body lying in the tomb, so what were they to believe?

Later that Easter evening, ten of the disciples along with likely many other followers of Christ locked themselves in a room together, because they were afraid that the ones who had killed their master were coming for them next. And then Jesus appeared to them! The stories were true! All of Jesus’ closest followers and friends were able to see Him with their own eyes—all except for Thomas, that is. And then eight days—eight long days—and Thomas had to listen to all the stories. “Thomas, you can’t

believe what happened! Jesus was here!” “Thomas, you should have seen it! Jesus appeared to us!” “Thomas, it was amazing! He showed us His hands, we touched His side. He is risen!”

If I were Thomas, I’d have assumed I was the target of some cruel joke; I’d have been waiting for the “April Fools!” punchline. But he didn’t get it. And you have to imagine that Thomas was wondering why everyone else got to see the risen Lord except for Him. He was all alone. He was completely left out. And now he had his doubts. I can empathize with that, and you probably can too, in part, because I think we’re all just like Thomas.

Do you believe Jesus has risen from the dead? I’m sure if I went one-by-one through the congregation, I’d receive all “yes” answers. But as for everything in connection with that fact, that’s where we might run into our doubts. Will I rise from the dead? Will I go to heaven? Did Jesus really die and rise for *me*, or am I left out? Is Jesus really preparing a place for *me*, or am I fooling myself? Does this really mean I’m forgiven, of *everything*? I would be surprised if we were answering all those questions with 100% confidence, because, just like Thomas, we all have our doubts.

And it’s tough when you’re in a Christian congregation, and you hear the Pastor proclaim the glory of the risen Savior, but you don’t see much of that glory in your life, it seems far off and almost unrelated to you. It’s strangely off-putting to hear a fellow Christian share the joyous confidence of forgiveness and salvation and eternal life in heaven, and you simply don’t feel as confident in the same. You know what to *say*, you know where the answers lie—in God’s Word—you know who the Savior is, you know “you just gotta believe!” But still there are those nagging doubts which persist because you are *you*, and I am *me*. In times like that when I’m struggling with doubts, I feel a lot like Thomas did, I imagine. I feel like everyone else knows something that I don’t know, that they’ve seen something I have not. And I *want* to know, I *want* that confidence, I *want* to believe with my whole heart that Jesus is *my* Savior, *my* Lord, and *my* God! I want to be able to say that, not only with conviction, but with the assurance that these things are actually true for me—like the rest of you seem to be able to do!

And you and I are just like Thomas, because at the end of the day, he couldn’t create his own faith or strengthen it, just like I cannot, and just like you cannot. In the weakness of his faith, he needed the Christ to come to *him*. And you and I need the Christ to come to us, just as He has today. **“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,”** (Matthew 18:20) Jesus says. That means He’s right here with us today. He’s appeared in this room, just like in that one many years ago. To strengthen our faith by delivering the same message.

Three times in our text, Jesus gives the same greeting, **“Peace be with you.”** Now, this was a common greeting of the day, “Shalom aleichem!” But it was not just a simple “hello” coming from Jesus, it was much more than just a greeting. No words—simple or complex, few or many—could even begin to match what Jesus was communicating by saying, **“Peace be with you.”** Because those words coming from those lips really gave peace. And that was exactly what these disciples needed to hear.

Consider this—these were the same disciples, as Mark writes, who, when Jesus was arrested, **“all forsook Him and fled.”** (Mark 14:50ff) Mark goes on to say that Peter followed along **“at a distance,”** and then adamantly denied even knowing who Jesus was. Presumably, most of them were not present at His crucifixion. And now we have Thomas making the bold declaration, **“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.”** That’s the group among whom Jesus is suddenly appearing!

And **“Peace,”** is what He says. **“Peace be with you.”** He was saying, “Your sins are forgiven, every one of them. There is peace between you and God! You need not fear, and you need not doubt.” And He had all the proof He needed to back up these words. To all of them He showed the proof, even to Doubting Thomas—**“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe.”**

What else could Jesus have said to those fearful disciples? To those spineless friends? To those deserters? To those doubters? What could He have said, what could He have *done*? What He *could* have done is one thing, what He *did* was something entirely different. **“Peace be with you.”** In the book of Isaiah, there’s a prophecy about Jesus, proclaiming, **“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.”** (Isaiah 42:3) That was a room full of bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks—weak faith all around. But Jesus responds to their weakness of faith, their doubting hearts, their slowness to believe, not in anger, but giving them the peace they needed.

Here we are, a room full of bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks, and Jesus’ message to us today is the same. **“Peace be with you. . . Do not disbelieve but believe.”** Yes, Jesus’ message today is that the crucifixion, the resurrection, the justification—His redemption—it was for you and me too. No, we don’t get to touch the nail holes or see the wounds, but God gives us His Word that these things are so. As John ends our text saying, **“These 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.”**

Seeing is not believing, believing is seeing! And He’s given us these Words so that we may believe. And I don’t think the question with us is whether these things took place, whether any of this was so. The questions start to come in play when we get involved, when our sins enter the picture. Well let me ask you this, since we have all these Words so that we may believe: Did Jesus of Nazareth do these things or not? Did He or did He not show His glory at the Wedding of Cana? Did He or did He not show Himself as the true Bread of Heaven that comes down and give life to the world? Did He or did He not raise the four-day-old corpse of Lazarus, to show that in God’s plan even death will be undone and death will not be victor? Did He or did He not die to grind away our guilt, to snatch away our sin, to liberate us to life with Him even right now? Did He or did He not die and rise to eternal life Himself so that we can know, so that we can *know*, that one day all sickness and all sin and all death and all fear will be undone, and we will live with Him forever. Did He do these things or not? He is among us today, declaring that these things are so.

He wants you. He wants you to know the answers. So, He gives you His word. He wanted Thomas to know the answers, so He showed him His hands and His side. He invited Thomas to place his fingers into the places of our salvation, into the only wounds in all of creation that caused the Father to smile. And Thomas’s response might be our very own, **“My Lord and My God!”** He is for me! He is for you too! He is *our* Lord and *our* God! His death is our very own, so that we might be His very own. His resurrection belongs to us, so that we might live in His Kingdom. He has declared it. It is so.

Christ is risen, and He declares peace to you. He’s among us today so that He can give power to my words, when I declare, **“Your sins are forgiven,”** Jesus is here backing it up, **“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”** **“Do not disbelieve but believe.”** What can we say to these things? Nothing more than what Thomas said, **“MY Lord and MY God.”** How astonishing that God would allow doubters like us to believe and declare with certainty that He is ours. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen.