

Seeing and Believing

John 20:24-30

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

April 11, 2021

The Gospel reading is John 20:24-30.

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

This is the Gospel of God.

Thanks be to God.

The introduction to a sermon is supposed to grab the attention of the listener. Maybe a story or an anecdote that links the listener to the topic of the sermon. Something current, maybe something in the news or something funny. This introduction does not do any of that.

If you want to put the congregation into a peaceful Sunday morning slumber, begin with an historical summary of the first century. That is what I am going to do.

I should at least justify my approach.

When reading the New Testament, I think we do not usually take into account the different life experiences of the people who made up the first century church. We don't usually consider that they lived in different countries, spoke different languages, lived under different political structures and had different religious backgrounds. And they were members of different generations – and that makes a difference in how the story of Jesus was told.

The first generation of Christians were those people who actually heard Jesus speak or witnessed some aspect of his ministry. They were there – his closest disciples and the larger body of disciples who followed him.

The second generation of Christians did not witness the ministry of Jesus first-hand. Paul, for example, never met Jesus or heard him speak. His dramatic conversion on the Damascus road occurred a couple of decades after Jesus died.

But members of the second generation had access to people who had witnessed Jesus' ministry.

For example, the brief preface to Luke's story of the ministry of Jesus (1:1-4) offers an important insight into the writing process of the authors of the Gospels. Luke implied that he not been a witness to the ministry of Jesus. But he says that there were still eye-witnesses alive and that he had talked with them. That is where he got his information. He said, *"I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you"*

The third generation of Christians, those who lived toward the end of the first century, were the first to become followers without having had first-hand knowledge of Jesus or information gained from people who had witnessed Jesus and his ministry. By the early and mid-nineties when the Fourth Gospel was written most of the eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus had passed on. The few who remained would have been elderly. That is the generation of Christians for whom John is writing his Gospel.

Incidentally, they are the ones whose situation in life is most like ours.

Tuck that away while we consider the incident in John's Gospel that involves the disciple who has been unfairly dubbed "Doubting Thomas."

I say unfairly dubbed, first, because his statement about seeing the wounds of Jesus before committing himself was absolutely reasonable. If you had been in his situation, would you have done differently? Second, because we know his character from an incident in which he was prepared to risk his life to be at Jesus' side. When Jesus told his disciples that he was going to the village of Bethany, because he had received word that his friend Lazarus had died, his disciples were concerned because that would mean he would be near Jerusalem and that could put his life in danger. Nonetheless, Thomas told the other disciples, *"Let us also go that we may die with him."* (John 11:16) That is a far greater measure of Thomas' faith than his more well-known "doubt."

On Sunday evening, the third day after the death of Jesus, he appeared to his disciples who were in hiding. He showed them the wounds in his hands and side, convincing them that, yes, he was indeed alive. But Thomas wasn't there. When the others told him what had happened, he didn't believe it. He said he would not/could not believe unless he saw evidence that Jesus was indeed alive. *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."* Thomas was asking for no more than the other disciples had already received.

A week passed. Then Jesus appeared again. This time his appearance seems to have had no other purpose than to convince Thomas. *"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side,"* Jesus said to Thomas. *"Do not doubt but believe."*

When Jesus said to Thomas, “*Do not doubt but believe,*” he was not challenging Thomas to believe in the doctrine of the resurrection, not even the doctrine of Jesus’ resurrection. He was challenging Thomas to believe in him, which introduces an element of trust into the notion of belief.

If I ask you if you believe in your doctor, I’m not asking if you believe s/he is a doctor or even if you believe that s/he is a capable doctor. I’m asking if you trust your doctor with your health and life. And the final test of whether you believe in your doctor is not whether you say you do but whether you actually put your health and perhaps your life in his/her hands.

More about that distinction later.

Then Jesus said to Thomas – and this is where the sermon has been pointing -- “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

Jesus was looking beyond Thomas and the other disciples, beyond the first generation of believers. He recognized that the process by which future generations would become and remain believers would be profoundly different from that point on. They would not be able to put their fingers in his wounds or touch his side. Nor would they be able to talk with anyone who had confirmed their faith in that way. They would have to believe without having tactile, sensory evidence. They would have to believe without “seeing.”

To the end of his days when doubts arose, when others questioned his faith, Thomas could look back on the day Jesus made a special appearance just for him.

A generation later, believers would not be able to do that. They might know someone who had a similarly powerful experience of the risen Christ and that would give them support in their faith. But a generation after that – the generation for whom John is telling the Jesus story and for every generation after that – for them faith would be radically different.

When the choir sang on Easter Sunday, “Were you there when he rose up from the grave?” They would have to answer, No. Do you know anybody who was? No.

That is the way it has been for every generation since that day, down to our generation. We are among those of whom Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*”

Jesus offered his blessing – his “my heart goes out to you” – to those who have not seen and yet have believed because he knew how difficult that would be and how precarious a life of faith could be.

Obviously, the challenges to faith that face us do not compare with the stresses and pressures placed on the first readers of John’s Gospel nor do they compare to the

challenges Christians in some cultures face today. My knee-jerk reaction to people who complain that Christians are being persecuted in America is to say, “Stop whining. That’s embarrassing. No one’s picking on you. You know how many atheists there are among the 500 and some odd members of Congress? One.”

But we should not underestimate the barriers placed in the way of faith.

The religious landscape is changing, which means that cultural support for faith is weakening.

Increasingly, we are greeted with headlines like, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.”

Pollsters are tracking the decline.

In 1945 75% of Americans claimed membership in a religious tradition. Today it’s 45% and trending downward, the first time it has been below 50% since Gallup started asking people that question in 1937.

Pew Research reports that “65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009.”

If your children remain firm in the faith, you’re one of the lucky ones.

There are lots of reasons for the decline, some of which can be traced to the church itself. Ask yourself, if the only things you knew about Christianity are what you read on social media or in the newspaper or saw on the evening news, would you say, I’d really like to be part of that?

The point is there is less and less support for faith and that makes religious belief more difficult.

In that regard, it is important to note that culture’s criticisms – many of which are justified in my opinion – are aimed at the church in its various denominational and non-denominational expressions. They are not aimed at Jesus, “the author and finisher of our faith.” He remains a challenge and an inspiration to believer, unbeliever and that category of person my predecessor called a can’t believer, a person really wants to believe but for a variety of reasons just can’t. *“The most beautiful guy who walked the face of this earth,”* said poet-songwriter Leonard Cohen said of Jesus. His *“generosity would overthrow the world if it was embraced because nothing could weather that compassion.”*

Which brings us back full circle to what it means to believe in Jesus.

As I have grown older, I have discovered that I believe less and trust more. I like it that way. That doesn't mean I have become an unbeliever. Of course not. Nor is it an invitation to disbelieve. It is simply an effort to understand faith in relational terms rather than in propositional terms.

To believe in Jesus – without “seeing” – is not simply to check another doctrinal box to demonstrate one's orthodoxy. It is to place the full weight of one's life in his hands, to put one's complete trust in his revelation of God and the nature and responsibilities of being human, alone and in community, and to commit oneself unreservedly to him and the cause for which he lived and died.

Again the words of Leonard Cohen:

*And you want to travel with him, and you want to travel blind
And then you think maybe you'll trust him
For he's touched your perfect body with his mind*

May God grant that the scriptural confession of faith might be ours: *“I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed to him against that day.” (II Timothy 1:12) Amen.*