

Stop doubting and believe

[Read John 20:19-31 NIV]

¹⁹On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." ²²And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

²⁴Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

²⁶A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Opening Image

There is an old saying, "Seeing is believing." If you have seen something with your own eyes will you believe? It was July 20, 1969. I remember that day vividly. I had read the newspaper and magazine articles closely. History was to be made. A man would set foot on the moon.

I stayed awake all night to see the fuzzy images on the TV. Neil Armstrong stepped out of the Lunar Lander and on to the lunar soil. He said, "That's one small step for man one giant leap for mankind." It was an historic day. No one was there except Neil and Buzz Aldrin, but everyone saw it live on TV. I believed but others did not.

My grandfather was among those unbelievers. He was born in 1903 the year of the Wright Brothers. He had lived through a lot of history. He saw the Great Depression, Bank failures, the New Deal, WW2, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. He was skeptical. He did not believe. He was sure that the government had faked the whole thing in the desert. There are many others who wrote letters to government claiming the whole thing was a fraud. Do you believe?

Have you ever experienced anything out of the ordinary? Some of you are nodding your heads. When you tried to tell someone else did, they believe you or did they give you a funny look? It is the same way with our faith.

God has revealed God's truth to believers in many ways. You can accept this truth or call it a coincidence. We receive God's truth with the eyes and ears of faith. When we share this truth with non-believers we are met with skepticism. What does the Bible say about sharing belief in God?

Narrative Summary

Our scripture lesson today tells us that our God is a God of faith that reveals God's truth in numerous ways. The disciples spent three years with Jesus but they did not learn faith. The disciples placed their faith in Jesus after Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Jesus revealed his glory to them and they placed their faith in him. Faith then is a gift from God where God reveals God's self.

Faith is a gift

This free and unmerited gift of faith comes from God's grace. God provided concrete evidence to the doubting disciples when they had lost their faith. Jesus came to the disciples and revealed himself to them so that they would believe. Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them. The disciples tried to tell Thomas that Jesus was alive but he refused to believe. Thomas wanted to see Jesus for himself. He would believe only when he could personally place his hands in the wounds of Jesus.

Narrative

Thomas missed an important meeting. It was one of the most important meetings in the life of the disciples. Jesus came and Thomas was somewhere else. Maybe he was busy that evening or too tired to come to a late-night church meeting. You know how church meetings can go on late into the evening. Because Thomas missed a gathering of the disciples, he ends up getting a bad reputation from this passage of scripture.

We have all heard the term “doubting Thomas.” Among all of the disciples and other believers, Thomas is singled out as the only one who does not believe. If we take a closer look at today’s scripture lesson, we discover that no one believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead until the truth about the resurrection was divinely revealed.

Faith is a gift

Again, faith in God is not something that can be learned. Faith comes to us as a gift from God. God’s gift of grace enables us to have faith. Last week we heard Mary Magdalene’s story about the resurrection. Mary and several of the women who were followers of Jesus went to the tomb on a Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus. The women went to the tomb because they saw the crucifixion and death of Jesus. They saw Jesus die and saw his dead body placed in a tomb. The eleven disciples were in a locked room because they feared the same fate as their master. When Jesus died the faith of his followers died with him. Everyone believed that Jesus was dead and would remain dead.

When the women arrived at the tomb, they were surprised to find it empty. They were perplexed. Where was the body? Had someone stolen the body? Mary tells the disciples that someone has taken the body of Jesus.

Divine Revelation

Then Mary is given the gift of divine revelation. Divine revelation is where God reveals a truth that we cannot discover with our limited senses and abilities. Jesus appears to Mary in the garden and calls her by name. Her faith is restored, and her life is changed. She leaves the tomb and tells the disciples the good news.

Doors are shut and locked

The disciples do not believe the Mary's testimony about Jesus. They think it is an idle tale. The disciples' faith in Jesus is dead. Mary tells the disciples all that she has seen but the disciples refuse to believe. They have not seen Jesus with their own eyes. They are sure that Jesus is dead. They are hiding in a locked room for fear of the authorities. They are immobilized by their lack of faith.

God acts first

Since the disciples are immobilized by fear, God takes the initiative and acts first. Jesus comes to the disciples. They too are given the gift of divine revelation. God gives the disciples the physical evidence that they need to have faith. Jesus appears to them in the locked room on the same day as he had appeared to Mary. He greets them with a familiar greeting. Jesus says, "Peace be with you."

Peace be with you

Jesus does not scold the disciples for running away. Jesus does not condemn Peter for his three denials. Instead, Jesus says, "Peace be with

you.” He comes in peace and brings a message of peace instead of condemnation.

The peace that Jesus brings is the peace that only Jesus can bring. He shows the disciples his hands and side. He reassures them that they have not been abandoned. Their faith is restored, and they are filled with joy.

The disciples did not come to faith because of the time they spent with Jesus on earth; they believed because of their encounter with the risen Christ. Their lives are forever changed because of their encounter with the risen Christ. The disciples tell Thomas and others that they have seen the Lord. Thomas was not with them, so he doesn't believe.

Doubting Thomas

A week passes and Thomas is with the disciples when Jesus makes his second appearance. The doors are shut and locked. The disciples have proclaimed their faith to Thomas, but he needs a little more convincing. Jesus has heard Thomas and knows what Thomas needs to believe. Jesus appears again and tells Thomas to place his hand in his wounds. It is the wounds of the risen Christ that opens his eyes to faith.

Gift

Thomas received a wonderful gift in that God revealed to Thomas what he needed to believe. His faith in Jesus was restored not through teaching but through divine revelation. Thomas believed because he was enabled by God's gift of grace to see the truth. Jesus departed from the disciples by

saying, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Good News

The Good News of this passage is that faith in God is a gift. God's grace enables us to receive the gift of divine revelation. We are finite beings with finite senses. Our knowledge of truth is limited by our finite bodies. Our belief in God is based on faith but our faith in God is not blind faith.

God comes to us out of love not out of coercion. God chooses to reveal God's self by giving us glimpses of God, but God does not coerce our belief through constant divine revelation. God provides us with glimpses of God's self so those who seek God will have just enough evidence through divine revelation to believe. We are created in the image of God with a free will to accept or reject God and God's will for our lives. You have the opportunity and choice to believe or not to believe.

God reveals God's self

God has revealed God's self to many faithful witnesses. God visited Abraham and Sarah in the form of three visitors. God spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob promising to keep God's covenant with God's people. God was revealed to Moses in the form of a burning bush on top of a mountain. God's character was revealed to many first century Jews and Gentiles by the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

We know about God not through our own abilities but through divine revelation. God comes to us and reveals God's self to us through human witnesses, the life of Jesus, and divinely inspired scripture. What is our response to this gift?

Our Response

Our response to God's gift is to stop doubting and believe. What does it mean to believe? If we believe in Jesus, then we will follow his teachings. Jesus told his disciples that the most important commandment was to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. It is not enough for us to believe that there is a God but then do nothing for our neighbor. Jesus told his disciples that even the demons believed in God.

Seeing Jesus

Many people want to see Jesus. I have heard many people say, "If I could just see Jesus then I would believe." Jesus told a parable that revealed places that we would encounter the risen Christ. That parable is the one about the Sheep and the Goats.

He asked those on the right and left the same questions. Did you offer me food when I was hungry or water when I was thirsty? Did you see me as a stranger and invite me into your home? Did you clothe me when I was naked? Did you visit me when I was sick or in prison? The righteous responded by saying when did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, in

prison, sick, and naked? Jesus told them when you did it for the least of the children of God you did it for me (Mt 25:31-46).

Stop doubting and believe

If you want to encounter the risen Christ, don't let your lack of faith lock you in a room. Build your relationship with God through scripture, prayer, worship and communion. Open your hearts to God's words, God's grace, and God's will. Have faith and believe the teachings of Jesus.

Reflect on the questions of Jesus. Did you feed me when I was hungry? ***Stop doubting and believe.*** Did you give me water when I was thirsty? ***Stop doubting and believe.*** Did you invite me in when I was a stranger? ***Stop doubting and believe.*** Did you visit me in the hospitals and prisons? ***Stop doubting and believe.*** Did you clothe me when I was naked? ***Stop doubting and believe.***

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Selected Bibliography

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