

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 2, Series C
Saturday, April 27th, 2019
Sunday, April 28th, 2019

Sermon: That You May Believe¹

Text: John 20:19-31

Focus: We have life in Jesus' name.

Function: That their faith would be strengthened by reading and hearing the Word.

Structure: Four Pages (Law-then-Gospel)

Locus: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith" (SC, 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed).

Trouble in the Text

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* The Word of God that engages us is our Gospel lesson, especially these words: "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" (John 20:31, ESV).² Seeing is believing—or so they say. That's what Thomas said in our Gospel lesson: "Unless I *see*... I will never believe" (John 21:25). Most of us are seasoned skeptics. We've been "had" too many times, and we'd rather keep a closed mind than an open heart. But the reality of faith is *not* that seeing is believing, but that *hearing* is believing. As Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have believed" (20:29). And John tells us, "These [things] are written so that you may believe..." (20:31).

Thomas was like the skeptics in every age: he sought visible, physical proof of the claim that Christ was risen from the dead. Overwhelmed by the death of Jesus, he insisted, "Unless I

¹ This is a revision of a sermon originally preached on Sunday, April 7th, 2013, at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

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” (v. 25).

And yet Thomas had all the proof he needed: the testimony of his brothers and sisters, their words of witness to the resurrection. “We have seen the Lord!” they proclaimed. And it should have been enough for him. After all, the organ of faith is not the eye, but the ear. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Trouble in the World

We’ve all been taught not to believe everything you hear. The news media are biased. “Fake news,” right?! Rumors abound. Gossip goes around. And so we have learned by experience to cast doubt on everything we hear. Words are cheap, and people will say anything to fool you, get their way, or get your money. So we don’t put much stock in what we hear. Especially in an age of digital technology, even seeing is not believing anymore. For with just a few clicks on a computer, an image or video can be doctored and distorted in almost any way imaginable.

Sadly, our skepticism extends even to Scripture. It’s not enough to quote chapter and verse. It’s not enough to say, “Jesus loves me; this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Modern Bible scholars and liberal theologians often cast doubt on the authorship and authority of the Scriptures. They tell us it isn’t the Word of God, but merely those of men. Routinely, especially at Christmas and Easter, PBS and the History Channel air documentaries that call into question everything we hold dear about the Bible. *Time* and *National Geographic* often run cover stories on everything from Mary Magdalene to the Gospel of Judas. Every church and preacher seems to have a different take on what the Bible teaches. Whom do we believe?

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If that isn't enough, the very circumstances of our lives cause us to doubt. We struggle to believe God's promises in the midst of trials and temptations. We wrestle to believe what we hear in the face of what we see. We worry if God is really almighty when he doesn't snap his fingers and make our problems go away. We question the callings God has laid on our lives when we lose our jobs or don't seem to be making a difference in the positions we currently hold. We wonder how God can be all-loving if he condemns so many to hell. Like Thomas, we have trembled in the darkness behind locked doors and refused to believe.

Where is the line between belief and unbelief, faith and despair? When we wrestle with doubt and struggle to understand God's will and ways, does that mean that we have lost our faith—or is there somewhere in between? What can we do when our faith is shaken? And what do we do when others come to us with their spiritual struggles?

Grace in the Text

Jesus gives us the answer. Jesus is the answer. He says, "Do not disbelieve, but believe" (v. 27). Despite Thomas' rude unbelief, Jesus remained loving and patient toward him. Eight days after Easter, when Christ came again through locked doors and appeared to his disciples, he didn't blast Thomas for his unbelief. He didn't despise him for his doubt. Instead he said, "Peace be with you" (v. 26). That's the refrain throughout John 20: "Peace be with you" (three times in our Gospel lesson). Peace for your troubled heart, peace for your wounded soul, and peace for your confused mind. And then, with the patience of a God who knows how weak we really are, reeds shaken by the wind, Jesus 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*" (v. 27). Believe in Jesus.

Amazingly, the story doesn't say that Thomas *did* touch Jesus. It's possible he did (that's the tradition). And pastors like to point out that faith always obeys, so if Jesus said, "Touch me," Thomas probably touched him. But maybe Thomas didn't *need* to touch Jesus. Perhaps Jesus' Word was finally enough, for Thomas declared in a bold statement of belief, "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28). What a bold confession of faith! How's that for a literal apostle's creed—"My Lord and my God"? At last Thomas believed! At last he hoped in the Word spoken to him by Jesus, the living Word (cf. 1 John 1:1).

Grace in the World

And then Jesus said something to Thomas that echoes through the ages and resounds in our ears to this day: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (v. 29). Blessed are those who *haven't* seen Jesus. Who are they, these people who haven't seen Jesus? Why, of course, they are you and I! *We* haven't seen Jesus with our eyes, but we have *heard* of him with our ears. We believe, and so we are blessed.

In the midst of our doubts and struggles of faith, we don't need more debate. Such a marvelous thing as God's Word deserves better than banter. What we need is a gracious and merciful God who is patient with us and keeps coming back to us tenderly in his Word. And we need fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are patient with us in our doubts. We need people willing to listen and pray with us. As Jude writes, "Have mercy on those who doubt" (Jude 22). And then direct them to God's Word.

"These [things] are written so that you may believe..., and that by believing you may have life in his name" (vv. 30-31). In the midst of doubt and despair, there is no greater comfort and hope than God's Word. Even when the Bible is the source of our unsettled souls, still it remains our only hope. The Bible assures us that God loves us, that Jesus died for our sins and

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rose again, that there is life after death, and that there is hope for *this* life too. When we lose our sense of direction in life, God's Word is our light and our lamp (Ps. 119:105). When we feel alone, Jesus promises, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

"These [things] are written that you may *believe*." I've never known anyone who lost their faith because they read their Bible too much! But I *have* known people who lost their faith by reading their Bible not enough—or not at all. God's Word is the food of faith. Without it, we will die spiritually. But we shall *live* if we hear and believe Jesus' words. Remember: Seeing is not believing; *hearing* is believing.

Today and every day, God's Word beckons to you with the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Will you hear? Will you believe? "These [things] are written so that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). "Do not disbelieve, but believe" (v. 27). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ☩ the Holy Spirit. Amen. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Amen.