

I SAW HIM AMONG MY DOUBTS

Text: John 20:19-31

4/25/10

I

Poor Thomas. He's like the guy who bends down to tie his shoes just as the meteor shower came shooting across the sky. By the time he looked up the show was over. There's nothing left but a crowd making extravagant claims; and the need to decide whether they really saw much of anything at all.

Thomas showed up at the post-resurrection party a little late. And that makes him like most Christians who have ever lived. The witnesses are chattering on about the risen Christ, and we are asked to alter the course our lives on what somebody else saw.

Thomas is the scientific rationalist in us all: *Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hands into his side, I will not believe it.* We've been to school, wondered how a good God allows such pain in the world, looked at few dinosaur fossils, heard of guy named Darwin, and been taught that nothing is more unnatural than the supernatural.

Doubt and belief are close together; just as stones throw apart. And is that so surprising when you are reaching for an invisible God? Philip Yancey the Christian writer, has asked, "How do you sustain a relationship with God, a being so different from any other, imperceptible by the five senses?"

Most of us are here because in one sense or another we want to see Jesus. We want to feed our faith and starve our doubt. But when the meat and potatoes of our age is skepticism, it can be a hard thing to do.

II

There's something about this story we should notice right away. This is not a story of Thomas coming to Jesus. This is a story of Jesus coming to Thomas. Thomas issues his challenge and Jesus takes it up.

Last week we joined some dispirited disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were stung at the defeat they believed Jesus had suffered at the hands of the authorities. They could not reason their way to the reality of a risen Lord. Instead the risen Lord walked with them until they came to see.

So Jesus comes to Thomas in the midst of his doubt. There's more to curing doubt than simply trying harder to believe. At the very least that means we are not dismissed from the presence of God simply by the presence of our doubts.

And doesn't that make our church an interesting place? We have to be an incubator for faith, and a safe place for doubt. The disciples don't banish Thomas from the fellowship because he has his doubts. They bear with Thomas until Jesus does what only Jesus can do. God tends to be pretty generous with those of little faith, and we should too.

Faith, seeing the risen Christ, is not like math. You don't simply add up the data and inescapably arrive at the resurrection of the dead. There's a step in the calculation that remains a mystery. The late Catholic novelist Flannery O'Connor wrote to a skeptic "I find it reasonable to believe, even though those beliefs are beyond reason."

Faith's not a no-brainer. Faith is a gift of God. And that means part of being the church is being willing to wait and pray for God to give the gift.

III

So Jesus shows up for Thomas. Thomas gets his "hands on" wish. But when Jesus comes he doesn't coddle Thomas' doubt. He challenges it.

Stop doubting and believe. Move on! Hanging out in the skeptical haze is not what Jesus has in mind for Thomas or his church.

The problem with doubt comes when we make it a lifestyle. Have you ever known anyone whose strongest belief is not to believe anything very much? Passion, dedication, and commitment...are the characteristics of the foolish and deluded. Some people are just too cool to be a fool.

But I think Jesus is asking for a little foolishness from Thomas and us. Jesus is not telling Thomas to banish all doubt from his life, as if faith is the absence of doubt. He's really asking something much more important. "*Are you in or not? Are you going to stand outside forever or come inside with the rest of us?*" Jesus is asking Thomas for enough certitude that he can get around to action. Jesus rose to send the church on a mission, not to debate the probability of the resurrection

I'll make you a promise. Love the Lord with your heart, mind, soul, and strength...and you will still have your doubts. So have your doubts, but challenge them. Move on.

Flannery O'Connor wrote:

When we get our spiritual house in order we'll be dead. This goes on. You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way, but it is making it in the darkness. Don't expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.

You might remember a story of Jesus in Mark's gospel being asked by a man to heal his son from a spirit that caused convulsions. "*If you can do anything take pity on us and help us.*" (Mark 9:22)

Jesus replies that, "*Everything is possible for him who believes.*" And then the man names the place where most of us live most of the time: *I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!*

Faith is not the absence of doubt. It is the willingness to let our doubts be challenged and to surrender them to a greater reality: Christ's presence in our lives.

IV

So doubt in our story does finally yield to sight. And more importantly it gives way to faith.

It's hard to know whether Thomas ever touched the risen Christ. We do know that he saw him. And then something important happens. Thomas makes a confession of faith, not an observation of science.

My Lord and my God!

Being the good scientific rationalists we all are, we're probably thinking, "No fair, Thomas finally got to see him after all." He got what we want.

But look more closely. Thomas doesn't simply see Jesus. He sees right through him. He doesn't see "a" Lord; he sees "his" Lord. And he doesn't just see a ruler, teacher, rabbi, or prophet; he sees God. He sees a claim on his life.

The Christian faith is not an invitation to see if we can find it plausible that a man named Jesus rose from the dead. It is a call to surrender our skepticism to the lordship and deity of Christ, and live like nothing matters more.

If we could park Noah's Ark in the front yard, set manna from the wilderness on the communion table, and put the real cross of Jesus on display, we still couldn't guarantee that it would add up for people to what just came off the lips of Thomas. After all there were plenty of people who saw Jesus and didn't confess a thing.

Scripture is a making a claim for hard headed rationalists like us to ponder. Sight is fine; belief is better. And seeing is not believing.

V

Jesus has a word for every Christian who missed the first resurrection party. Jesus has a word for the millions of us who will live and die without ever seeing what Thomas saw. Speaking to Thomas he says, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"

There's more than one way to experience the transforming presence of Jesus Christ in your life. You could if you were an ancient apostle experience the risen Christ and come to believe. But it is just as good to believe in the Risen Christ, and therefore come to experience him.

In fact Jesus says it's better. We are "blessed" if we believe without seeing. It seems the only thing better than the "first sight" of vision is the "second sight" of faith.

So maybe it's time to close our eyes instead of opening them. To invite the risen Christ to help us see what our eyes can never tell us. To be willing to part with our doubts about him. We may discover that believing is seeing.

Conclusion

Madeliene L'Engle tells a true story about a family who had a two and half year old daughter and are expecting another baby. Eventually the baby comes and the family does all it can to soften the displacement she might feel. Everything seems fine until they try to put her to bed.

“I want to see the baby.”

“Well of course, we'll take you to see the baby.”

“No-alone.”

“No, Mommy and Daddy will go with you.”

“No I want to see the baby alone!” She's distraught so finally they let her go.

She bends over the cradle and says, “Tell me about God. I'm forgetting.”

We forget. It doesn't take long. We dwell in the land of skepticism. We wallow in our doubts. *Unless I put my hand in his side I will not believe.* And frequently the vision of God fades before our eyes.

Jesus challenges us to look a reality from a different point of view. Why not try believing in the One we'd desperately like to see.