

Easter 2, April 16, 2023

JOHN 20:19–31. (EHV)

On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, **“Peace be with you!”** After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, **“Peace be with you! Just as the Father has sent me, I am also sending you.”** After saying this, he breathed on them and said, **“Receive the Holy Spirit. Whenever you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven. Whenever you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”** But Thomas, one of the Twelve, the one called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples kept telling him, **“We have seen the Lord!”** But he said to them, **“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe.”** After eight days, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them. **“Peace be with you,”** he said. Then he said to Thomas, **“Put your finger here and look at my hands. Take your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue to doubt, but believe.”** Thomas answered him, **“My Lord and my God!”** Jesus said to him, **“Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”** Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, did many other miraculous signs that are not written in this book. But 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.

Just out of curiosity, I once went to the website of a seminary belonging to a different Lutheran church body, a church body that does not generally view all Scripture as God’s word. I saw that they posted the chapel devotions that the seminarians had recently given, so I read one of them. Ninety percent of the devotion consisted of this particular young man talking about himself, his life story, the various factors that led to him enrolling at this particular seminary. Very little about Jesus. In the last ten percent, he told his fellow students that they should really get to know the president of the seminary, because he was a neat guy. One of the last facts he shared about the seminary president was that **“he even believes in the resurrection. Like, he *actually* believes in the resurrection.”** In other words, this seminary’s president didn’t just believe that Jesus rose in a spiritual sense, by continuing to live and be active in the disciples’ hearts. He actually believed that Jesus physically rose from the dead—and this seminarian had not previously encountered too many people who believed that. In his belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus, the president of the seminary was the exception at the seminary, not the norm.

If there are skeptics of the resurrection at Lutheran seminaries in our country, you had better believe that there are not only skeptics among the unbelievers, but also among those who attend church faithfully and consider themselves dedicated Christians. On page 7 of your service folder, you can read for yourself how Martin Luther himself acknowledged that the resurrection of the body, including the resurrection of Christ’s body, is the most difficult article of faith to believe. If you’ve ever encountered a dead person, your reason and all your senses will tell you, **“This cannot be undone. This body cannot come back to life.”**

Thankfully, Jesus didn't just have regular Easter. He didn't just rise from the dead on Easter Sunday. He also had a special Easter for skeptics the Sunday after he rose from the dead, when he appeared to the disciple that we have come to know as Doubting Thomas.

1. Jesus Proves that He Is Alive and Is the Son of God

Most of the Evangelists freely share that most of the disciples were skeptics on Easter. Mark tells us the disciples did not believe the women when they shared the angels' words. Luke tells us that the women's report that Jesus was risen seemed to them like nonsense, and that even when Jesus appeared to them, they still had difficulty believing it until Jesus ate something in front of them. John tells us that he himself didn't believe until he went and saw the tomb for himself, but that he still didn't understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

But one of the disciples was much more stubborn in his refusal to believe than the rest. Thomas, who was called the Twin, either because he had a twin or perhaps because he looked a lot like someone else who was well known. John doesn't tell us why Thomas didn't believe. Maybe he was someone who had been burned by others too many times, and Jesus was his last hope. So when Jesus was arrested, condemned, and crucified and then died and was buried, he told himself, "That's it. From now on, if it seems too good to be true, it is." Or maybe he was one of those people who get into a certain groove and have great difficulty getting out of it, and don't really want to get out of it. They start grieving a certain way and need to finish grieving the way they started. Having the process interrupted, even by good news that would render their grief null and void, is only a nuisance. If any of you have read the *Lord of the Rings* books or seen the movies, that kind of person is portrayed well in the fictional character Denethor, who thinks that his son Faramir is dead and that his city is lost, and so he gives orders to have his son burned on a funeral pyre. When he is told that his son is only badly wounded and not dead, he refuses to believe the news. He has already sunk into his grief and he refuses to be lifted out of it.

Perhaps that is why Thomas didn't believe, but we don't know for sure. But John doesn't really need to tell us why in order for Thomas to be an understandable character. Thomas says, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe." "Don't just tell me Jesus is alive. That's no good. You need to show me. I need to see it for myself." He is a true skeptic. He needs to see to believe. We all have heard of people like that, and probably know some too. Maybe in certain circumstances, we are that person.

Imagine if Jesus had left Thomas like that—and he could have. Later when Jesus says what many translations render, "Stop doubting," what Jesus really says is, "Stop being an unbeliever." Being a doubter doesn't necessarily mean you don't believe at all, but if Jesus calls you an unbeliever, that means you don't have faith. And Thomas did have faith at one time. He believed before his Lord died. So if he believed, and then lost his faith, and then had died in that state, the Bible says in more than one place that he would have been worse off in hell than if he had never believed at all (Luke 12:47–48; 2 Pet. 2:20–21).

But in his mercy Jesus didn't leave Thomas like that. He returned the following week and gave Thomas the proof he demanded. In fact, he not only proved that he was really alive and well after being crucified and having died. He proved that he was the Son of God. He appeared in the midst of them even though the doors were locked. If you guys locked all the sanctuary

doors before the service, I wouldn't be able to get in here. Neither would any of you, if you weren't already inside. Jesus passed through that solid enclosed space with his physical body. He could only have done that by supernatural, divine power.

Then did you hear what he told Thomas? Thomas had said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe." And what did Jesus now tell him? "Put your finger here and look at my hands. Take your hand and put it into my side. Stop being an unbeliever, and believe." What was Jesus in effect telling Thomas? "Even though you couldn't see me, I was still there to hear your skepticism, to hear your expressions of unbelief. I heard every word you said. I am the Son of God. I hear and see all. So you know you don't deserve me to be here. But I want to be here nonetheless. I want you to stop with your unbelief, and to believe once again."

And we heard Thomas's response: "My Lord and my God!" He understood what Jesus had just proved to him—not only that he had risen from the dead, but in rising from the dead he had proven himself to be God himself in the flesh.

I find it interesting that we're only told what Thomas said, not what he did. There's a famous painting by Caravaggio of Thomas putting his finger in the scar in Jesus's side. In fact, Caravaggio paints it as if Jesus grabbed Thomas by the hand and pulled his finger into him, as if to say, "See? It's really me." And that indeed may be how it happened. But there are other passages in John where Jesus gives people commands, and John does just have us assume that the people did what Jesus told them to do. He actually tells us how the people responded. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told Judas on Holy Thursday. And then Judas took the morsel from Jesus and left (John 13:27, 30). "Do not hold on to me, but go to my brothers," Jesus told Mary Magdalene on Easter morning. And Mary Magdalene left and told the disciples what Jesus had said (John 20:17–18). But here we are not told that Thomas actually did touch Jesus's hands or side, just that he said, "My Lord and my God!" And later Jesus does not say, "Because you have seen me *and touched me*, you have believed," but only, "Because you have seen me." I wonder if Thomas actually dared to touch Jesus, or if Jesus's appearance and his words were more than enough.

What would we do? Have we ever said to Jesus, "Are you even there? Are you really listening?" Have we even said things like, "Why did you let this happen? How could this be part of your good plan? How dare you!" Just like Jesus heard Thomas, so he has heard us in our moments of skepticism and unbelief. What if he were to then appear before our very eyes and repeat our words to us: "Come here and whisper something into my ears and see if I am one who actually listens." "Come here and look at my plans"—as he lets a huge tome a hundred times the size of this Bible fall open and thud loudly on the table in front of you—"and see why I dared to let such a thing happen." Would we dare at that point? Or would we simply tremble and bow before him and say, "My Lord and my God!"

2. Jesus Proves that His Word Is Proof Enough

Jesus knew there were be plenty more Thomases, plenty more skeptics, plenty more doubters and unbelievers, and he knew that he would not appear to them all, knew that it would in fact completely undermine the power of his word and ruin the beauty and blessedness of faith

if he appeared to every skeptic. So he immediately told Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus appeared to Thomas not only to prove to Thomas that he was alive and that he was and is the Son of God, but also to prove that he doesn’t want doubters and unbelievers. There are even religious leaders in the visible Christian church today who will talk about the *blessing* of doubt and the *blessing* of uncertainty, perhaps because they think that doubt makes us less stubbornly disagreeable and more open-minded and will enable us to have more open and friendly conversations with those who have different opinions and views. But if doubt, uncertainty, and unbelief were such great blessings, Jesus would have left Thomas just the way he was. Jesus wanted Thomas to know the truth and be certain of it.

But now that he has proven that he doesn’t want doubters and unbelievers, he tells us what the cure is for doubt and unbelief—“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus’s word is proof enough. Jesus’s word is what brings eternal blessedness.

John then puts this truth into practice and gives us an opportunity to put this truth into practice: “Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, did many other miraculous signs that are not written in this book. But 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.” Where’s the proof that Jesus did many other miraculous signs, John? The proof is that Jesus said so, through his apostle John. The proof is the miracles he does share with us in his word—miracles like healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and rising from the dead. These miracles that are recorded are enough to give faith. These miracles that are recorded are enough to give eternal life.

We know this by experience, don’t we? After all, none of us has seen Jesus alive in the flesh. Jesus has not appeared to us in person during our conscious hours to dispel our doubts or our unbelief. We are believers through the power of his word, nothing more. Christians in every century since Jesus rose from the dead know Jesus died and rose from the dead because he tells us so in his word, and because that good news gives us forgiveness and peace we cannot find anywhere else.

This is why we don’t just need Easter. We also need the Sunday after Easter, Easter for the skeptics, and the Sunday after the Sunday after Easter, and all the other Sundays. Christians freely chose Sunday as their day of worship as a reminder that here in the assembly of the saints, here through his word, Jesus does for us spiritually the exact same thing he did for his disciples and for Thomas physically on Easter Sunday and on the Sunday after Easter. Here, in and through his word, is where he dispels our skepticism and strengthens our faith. Here, in and through his word, is where he assures us that he is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.