

THE SPECIAL BLESSING

We call him “Doubting Thomas.” It doesn’t matter that you won’t find that label anywhere in the Gospels. It doesn’t matter that Thomas wasn’t alone in finding it hard to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It doesn’t matter that Thomas never said, “I won’t ever believe. . . .” What he said was, “I will not believe unless. . . .”

Thomas was open-minded enough to say, in effect, “I’ll consider what you’re telling me, but I’m going to reserve judgment until I see some proof that Jesus is alive and you actually saw him.”

See, that’s the thing. The other guys, Thomas’s fellow disciples, they all had their proof. They were there in a locked room, huddled together and terrified for their lives, when Jesus appeared. They saw him. Jesus showed them his hands and his side, with the wounds that had been caused by his crucifixion. Jesus spoke to them. “Peace be with you.” And the disciples, minus Thomas, heard his voice. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on them. They felt the wind of the Spirit blowing. Jesus charged them to go out and make disciples and forgive people’s sins. Or not forgive their sins, depending on the circumstances, I guess.

After all those events and happenings took place, it was no wonder those disciples hiding behind closed and locked doors ended up believing in Jesus’ resurrection. So, did they honestly expect Thomas, who for whatever reason wasn’t there in the room with them, to simply take their word for it?

His friends having been blessed to see, hear and talk with the risen Lord, I don’t think it was too much for Thomas to request a personal appearance by Jesus for himself. Along with a little exploration, some touching and feeling, an examination of the evidence. Just to be sure. And Jesus obliged Thomas. Jesus returned to the room (which, by the way, the disciples who had seen him and believed he had been raised from the dead were still holed up in) for an encore. And this time, Thomas was there.

Be careful what you ask for, right?

Just how Jesus came to know what Thomas needed in order to believe he had risen, I don’t know. But he did. Maybe Jesus was on the other side of the

locked door, listening in on the conversation between Thomas and the others after Thomas returned from wherever he was and whatever he was doing. Or maybe after three years of living in close proximity to Thomas, Jesus was keenly aware of his personality, his need for tangible, touchable, visible signs of God's power. Or perhaps Jesus simply knew how difficult it was—incredibly difficult—for anyone, even one of his own disciples, to believe that he had been resurrected from the dead. So, when he noticed that Thomas wasn't in the room when he came to the disciples the first time, I can imagine Jesus making a mental note to himself right then and there to return again when Thomas would be there, so Thomas could also see firsthand and come to believe in God's power over death.

However Jesus came to know what Thomas wanted, what Thomas needed, what Thomas had demanded in order to believe, Jesus was there for him. The Lord returned to the shut and locked room, specifically for Thomas. Jesus made a special appearance just for him. Thomas wanted to see Jesus with his own eyes, to get a look at the wounds he received from his time on the cross, and to explore those wounds, to probe them with his own hand and finger. And Jesus made that happen.

After once again greeting them all with the words, "Peace be with you," the Lord focused his attention directly on Thomas. "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Many people make the assumption that Jesus was chastising Thomas, scolding him because of Thomas's lack of faith. I don't see it that way. What I see is a Savior who was willing to go to extreme lengths to move Thomas to have faith that he was risen from the dead and was alive. What I observe is a Lord who wasn't rebuking Thomas at all, but was inviting him, no, urging him to trust that, in Jesus, life had indeed won the war against death.

It was imperative, it was vital to Christ that Thomas come to believe. And he would do whatever it took to get Thomas to believe. In that sense, I can't help but think that if Thomas had said, "Unless I see Jesus do a handstand and a couple of cartwheels right here in front of me, I will not believe," Jesus would have gladly done that handstand and those cartwheels for him. But it wasn't handstands and cartwheels Thomas wanted from Jesus. No, he wanted Jesus to offer physical evidence, to show him that his appearance wasn't some figment of his friends' imaginations, or some kind of mass delusion brought on by the disciples' refusal to accept that Jesus had actually died on the cross.

Putting his finger in Jesus' nail wounds and his hand into the spear wound in Jesus' side should do the trick. And Jesus obliged him.

“Go ahead, Thomas,” said Jesus. “Do whatever you need to do. Look at my hands. Put your finger here where the nails were if you want. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

“Stop doubting and believe.” That was the whole point of Jesus’ second visit to the disciples—and to Thomas in particular. To stop doubting and believe. That was at the top of Jesus’ “To Do” list. That was the most important thing on Jesus’ agenda. Nothing else was more important for our Lord than to get Thomas to stop doubting and believe.

We don’t know if Thomas actually did probe Jesus’ wounds like he demanded. John’s Gospel doesn’t say that the disciple put his finger in Jesus’ nail wounds or placed his hand in Jesus’ side. Maybe he did, and maybe he didn’t. I’d like to think that Thomas didn’t have to; that for him, seeing was believing. But in the whole scheme of things, it doesn’t really matter. It’s a moot point. The only thing that truly matters in this story—to Jesus and to us—was Thomas’s response to Jesus.

“My Lord and my God!”

That’s the highest affirmation of Jesus’ identity and his divinity in all four gospels. When the other disciples witnessed Jesus resurrection appearance without Thomas being present, their response was an affirmation of Jesus’ resurrection. “We have seen the Lord!” They believed God had raised him from the dead. That’s obvious. But Thomas’s response was greater than theirs. It was bolder and more assertive. “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas affirmed not only Jesus’ resurrection, but Jesus himself, as the One God sent to save the world from sin and eternal death.

Doubting Thomas?

I doubt it.

Yes, Thomas was skeptical at first; but it turned out that he wasn’t a skeptic. Certainly Thomas had his doubts when his friends said they had seen the Lord; but in the end, he wasn’t a doubter. Not in the least. As a matter of fact, I would argue that, in the end, Thomas was the boldest, strongest and most confident believer in the risen Christ of all the disciples.

At this point it needs to be admitted that, yes, Thomas needed some proof before he would put his candle down and believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Jesus himself told Thomas as much. “Because you have seen me, you have believed.” Again, I don’t see that as a criticism or a rebuke of Thomas, but merely an acknowledgment of the truth. Some people simply need more evidence, more verification than others before they’re able to believe, and I guess Thomas was one of those kinds of people.

However (and this is great news for us!), Jesus did reserve a special blessing for those people who come to believe without seeing; for those who have faith even though Jesus never made a personal appearance in their lives or offered to let them touch the wounds in his hands and side as confirmation that he is indeed the risen Lord.

I'm assuming that the faith of everyone here in this sanctuary exists without having had the opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh and probe Jesus' wounds; which means that all of us are specially blessed believers. And that's a great thing.

One final point before I finish.

I love the way John's Gospel ends (and most Bible scholars believe that verses thirty and thirty-one are the original ending to John's Gospel. If so, it's an appropriate and satisfying ending). "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book." That leaves things wide open, doesn't it? Because if Jesus performed so many "other signs" in the presence of his disciples that the author of John's Gospel didn't even try to write them down, that means Jesus could choose to perform "many other signs" even now, today, for us, in 2017.

So, who knows? One day, you or I could possibly have a Thomas-like experience in which the risen Christ appears to us in a powerful and life-altering way. And praise God if that does happen! But if it doesn't happen to us, we need not be too disappointed. Because it doesn't mean Jesus doesn't care about us, or doesn't love us, or doesn't think it's that important for us to believe in him.

What it does mean is that Jesus has simply decided to bless us with a special and exceptional blessing: the blessing of not having seen, and yet still believing in him as the risen Christ, the one who is our Lord and our God.

Thanks and praise be to God. Amen.