

Blessed is WHO?

John 20:19-31

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Many of us, myself included, have come to know the disciple, Thomas, by the name "Doubting Thomas." He just couldn't take the word of his friends (whom he had spent most of his life with the past 3 years, doing ministry and working with Jesus).

They told him of Jesus' appearance to them after his death. They told him how Jesus suddenly appeared in the room. It was him, alright, they said. His face, his hands and feet that held the scars of the nails.

But Thomas insisted that for him to believe he must see for himself; he must put his hand in the hole of Jesus' side where he had been pierced with a sword and he must see with his own eyes the holes in Jesus' hands where the nails had been driven.

"Unless I see ... I won't believe." He said.

We call him "Doubting Thomas," but really, is he any different from us? He was only asking for what seemed reasonable. After all, the other disciples were given that privilege of witnessing with their own eyes. Thomas wasn't asking for more than what his friends had already gotten.

We focus on this story so often and so much that we lose the story of Thomas that precedes this. It was a time before Jesus' death but he knew his life was on the line. They all knew it and in fact, Jesus' disciples are all in hiding, along with Jesus, as they fear for their own lives too.

But it is Thomas who speaks out when Jesus is summoned to go to Bethany when his friend, Lazarus, is dying. Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, have sent a message for Jesus to come.

Jesus tells the disciples that they need to go to Bethany but all the disciples say is that the Jews are trying to find them. It would be unsafe. "The Jews are trying to stone you," they said to Jesus. "Why would you go back there?"

But Thomas is the one ... the only one ... who seems to understand that Jesus' has to go back ... that is the only thing he can do. Thomas doesn't question. He doesn't doubt Jesus' judgment. He just says: 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' (John 11:16)

Thomas is willing to die with Jesus if that is what has to happen, if that is what it means to support him. Thomas seemed to believe in Jesus and what he decided to do ... even to the point of death.

Of course, when that time actually came, when they came to arrest Jesus and take him off for trial, all the disciples fled, abandoning Jesus. Yes, including Thomas.

So maybe Thomas, who had had good, brave intentions when it came to dying for Jesus, just needed the hard evidence, to give himself another chance. If he was going to possibly die for Jesus, he wanted to be sure it really was Jesus whom he was dying for.

So ... would you be any different? Would I, in that situation with those disciples who had just witnessed the horrible death of their friend? Wouldn't we all have needed some visible truth before we could accept that Jesus was no longer dead?

I agree with Barbara Brown Taylor, one of my favorite writers and preachers, who says that she would probably be much like Thomas.

Taylor says that people have reported with great conviction, that they have seen a UFO. Actually seen it. Or they have told about seeing a statue of Mary crying tears of blood. But, she says, she has never seen those things and until she does, she will remain skeptical.

I had a dear, elderly friend, who told me he regularly did time travel, out of body experiences, where he would visit his grandparents who had died. He also told me he often saw an angel standing beside me when I was serving communion.

I'm not saying that's impossible, or that my friend was lying ... certainly not! I know he was completely sure of what he was telling me.

But if it isn't really my own experience, my own witness, it's hard to grasp what is really the truth. I have never known or seen those things myself, so they are not so much my reality, thus not completely true for me.

I would guess you are not that different from me.

I don't think it's difficult to put ourselves in Thomas' place. Or even the disciples who were up there in that room, hiding in fear. The other disciples saw Jesus first and believed that it was him because they saw him. None of them believed the women who came back that Sunday morning saying Jesus had risen from the dead.

But after seeing Jesus with their own eyes, they told Thomas, who apparently was the only one who wasn't hiding away in fear after Jesus' death. He was gone when Jesus' first appeared. Must have been the one who decided he would not hide. He would get done what the day brought for him to do. Maybe he went to get some take out food so everyone could eat and be nourished.

But here is where the story turns. Here is where we might find ourselves looking on, not at the nail scarred hands and pierced side but almost through a window of time ... hearing, more than seeing, Jesus words to Thomas that extend out to us.

Jesus does go into the room again, this time when Thomas is there with the others. And he tells Thomas to touch the holes in his hand and side and to see that is really him. And Thomas does.

We aren't told what the reaction is of the other disciples so much. But Thomas is the first to proclaim that Jesus is Lord. He falls to his knees and worships him proclaiming, "My Lord and my God!"

"Do you believe because you have seen?" Jesus asked Thomas.

And then Jesus says, almost as if he is looking over his shoulder, speaking out to the many people whom the disciples would witness to ... even us today in the 21st century:

"Blessed are those who believe without seeing."

Blessed are WHO? Could it be you? As far as I know, none of us have ever actually seen Jesus. Or touched him. Or heard his voice. At least not as Thomas and the other disciples experienced him.

And yet, we claim to believe. And we are certainly blessed, are we not?

Of course, some of us believe without ever asking for any proof. We read the Scripture or hear a sermon and we are convicted deep in our hearts that Jesus is real; he is alive, even today. We give our hearts to him without question; without any need for visible proof.

But for some of us, that unquestioning faith doesn't come so easily. Some people struggle ... wrestle ... with their faith for a long time; some, even for all their lives.

When I was in seminary, Dr. Donald Blesch had just retired. He had taught theology, I believe, in the seminary where I attended. But he wrote a book on Evangelism and came to the seminary to talk to us about his book.

I remember that a big debate came up because he made the statement that it was a sin to have doubts about your faith – about the reality of God, or Jesus, as God's Son.

I was fairly new to seminary and did not feel comfortable with getting into that debate, but I sure listened and had my own opinion, which seemed to match everyone else's in the room, except Dr. Bloesch.

Even the current theology professor argued with him, as well as the seminary students, that it was not a sin to doubt, because doubt led to seeking proof. Doubt leads to wrestling with God's Word and trying to understand it so you can, hopefully, come to believe.

Doubt doesn't necessarily mean you don't believe. It can lead to unbelief, but doubt means you aren't completely sure. Just as I doubt the appearance of time travel for my friend, Jud, I don't necessarily disbelieve it. I'm just not completely sure. Jud, now deceased, was a deeply spiritual man, and very trustworthy. But unless I actually have an out of body, time travel experience, I still have doubts.

Doubt, I think, can lead to not believing if you decide to give up on seeking the truth. Of course, we also have a very special gift that is given to us by God. It is the gift that John says Jesus breathed into the disciples.

It was the gift of the Holy Spirit that came upon the disciples with enough amazing power that the Church of Christ was born. The disciples suddenly found that their fears were gone; their tongues were loosened; they had the ability to preach about Jesus and the resurrection and people believed – yes, without actually ever seeing Jesus.

The Holy Spirit plants in us that powerful faith ... that ability to believe without visible proof.

It only takes a tiny little seed of faith. That tiny seed, even the size of a mustard seed, can be enough to help us to "see" without seeing; to touch Jesus, without tangibly touching; to know him without seeing his physical body.

When we come to this table, we have the gift of seeing, touching, smelling, hearing and tasting our Lord. It is the gift he has given us to help us believe, and it is by the Holy Spirit that we know Christ is present with us in this meal.

Many churches are returning to the practice of celebrating The Eucharist – The Lord's Supper – every Sunday, for that very reason. We need those regular, often moments where we are fed, where we touch the bread and smell its fragrance, where we drink the fruit of the vine and taste its sweetness.

Where we hear Jesus' words ... this is my body, given for you; this is my blood, shed for you. When you come together do this and remember my death and my resurrection. Remember that I will come again.

We do it often and regularly because we need the nourishment, the tangible, tasty bread and cup, the aroma, the sweet Words of Jesus that feeds us, strengthens us and helps us to know that we are among those whom Jesus said are blessed.

Blessed are YOU, who believe without seeing, but who have wonderful gifts of grace to help that belief. If you have doubt, may it lead you to examining the Scriptures more closely; may it cause you to pray more often, asking God to help you believe without seeing; to see in different ways.

If you have doubt, there comes a point where you do have to say, I have faith because God has given it to me; I will believe and pray that that my faith will grow.

John writes "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

Blessed is WHO? Blessed are YOU! Amen.

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