

## **Believing without Seeing: *John 20:19-31***

Norwalk Christian Church, April 12, 2015, Easter 2, Year B

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I never met my Dad's grandfather, Everett Taylor, but I grew up hearing stories about Grandpa Taylor. His life profoundly shaped my Dad's life, and throughout childhood, Dad would tell stories and share pieces of his grandfather's Southern Missouri country wisdom. The saying I remember the most, because my Dad repeated it the most, was this: "Believe none of what you hear, and only half of what you see."

I heard my great grandfather speak to me this week as I read this story from John's gospel. "Believe none of what you hear, and only half of what you see"--words that could have been said by Thomas himself.

Before we get too much further, I need to remind us where we are today. This Sunday, we are in John's church, but last week, on Easter Sunday, we were in Mark's church, which is a very different place. You remember Mark's Easter sermon last week, how the three women show up to the tomb just after sunrise, find the stone rolled away, look inside, and Jesus is no where to be found, only a man dressed in white. They receive the news that Christ has risen, but Mark ends his sermon by telling us, "Terror and amazement seized them. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

We are not in Mark's church this morning. Today, a week after Easter, we are in John's church, and John's church is one of those holy-roller churches. Everyone is testifying! You can't stop them from talking. Had we worshipped with John on Easter, we would have heard his sermon, that began when it was still dark. According to John, Mary Magdalene arrives first on Easter, sees the stone is gone, and runs back to get Simon Peter and "the disciples whom Jesus loved", which tradition says is John, himself.

These three disciples sprint to the tomb, the other disciple outrunning Peter and Mary. When they confirm the tomb is empty, Mary Magdalene stands outside of it, weeping. That's when she sees a man. She thinks is the gardener: "Woman, why are you weeping?" he asks. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." "Mary," the man says, and immediately upon hearing her name, she recognizes the risen Christ standing in front of her.

Mary isn't terrified into silence: she goes without being told, and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" That night, Easter evening, they gather in a house and lock all the doors, scared that those who killed Jesus might come and get them, too.

And out of nowhere, Jesus appears! Neither tombstones nor locked doors can keep the risen Christ out. He shows them the crucifixion wounds still present in his resurrected body, proof that the one they saw die was the one they now see before them.

But not all the disciples are there. Thomas had other plans that night, and when they tell him, “We have seen the Lord!”, Thomas says, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Believe none of what you hear, and only half of what you see.

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I don't know about you, but I like Thomas. Thomas has gotten a bad rap in the church. He's been labeled “Doubting Thomas”, but he seems more like “Realist Thomas”, to me. He wants the same thing all the other disciples got: proof. And why not?

Everyone in the room has seen the risen Christ--everyone but Thomas. Why would Thomas not demand the same? And wouldn't we do the same? If we could ask for proof, proof that this story is real, that Jesus died, was buried and rose again on the third day--wouldn't we? I'd be the first in line.

We crave proof. Go to the a bookstore, browse the best sellers on Amazon.com, and you will see. “Heaven Is For Real” one book says. A few months ago, the author of one of *90 Minutes in Heaven* was speaking in Norwalk, sharing his personal story about how he died, went to heaven, got a look around, and came back to tell us Iowans about it.

Give me a story like that! Proof that it's for real. I'd be the first in line.

The other day, we were browsing the antique items for sale at the Brass Armadillo, off Interstate 80, and there was a plaster “death mask” of Abraham Lincoln's face. Supposedly that mask in that cabinet on the north side of Des Moines was cast along with others from a bust made after Lincoln's assassination. Some doubt that story, but had there not been a lock on the cabinet, I could have touched it with my own hands, stuck my finger in Lincoln's eye socket.

I've never doubted Lincoln lived, nor that he died the way history says he died. I didn't see it myself, nor have I met anyone who did. But I've read their stories. I've seen pictures. There is physical evidence: newspaper articles, a blood-stained pillow and clothes, a bust made of plaster sitting in the Brass Armadillo Antique Mall. I believe!

But this story: the story of God coming to earth as a human. The story of a virgin birth, and an escape into Egypt. The story of miracles and proclamations from mountaintops. The story of a Jew from Palestine, who was killed by Rome, but then, three days later had an Easter Sunday resurrection. The story of post-resurrection appearances, not to the masses from mountaintops, but to scared disciples in isolated gardens or locked rooms or along deserted sea-shores...this story, well, this story is hard to believe.

Believe none of what you hear, and only have of what you see. Yet, all we have is testimony, and that written thousands of years ago.

No, I'd be the first in line, right behind Thomas. "Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

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Thomas gets exactly what he asks for, by the way. "Put your finger here and see my hands," Jesus says. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Everything Thomas asks for, Jesus gives. And Thomas, upon examining the evidence, believes.

Jesus responds, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

I used to think that was an insult: [read insultingly] "Have you believed because you have seen me?!!" Seems a bit harsh. They all--every one of them in the room--believed because they had seen Jesus, and only because they had seen Jesus.

But Jesus is not talking to them, not anymore. Who are those who have believed without seeing?

You know, John's church...it's a lot like our church. When this gospel was written, John was an old man, decades from those days when he had the youthful energy to beat Peter to the empty tomb. He's outlived most, if not all, of the resurrection witnesses, and he's a part of a church, a community of disciples, none of whom saw Jesus in the flesh--before or after the resurrection.

John preaches this sermon to them, proclaiming all he had witnessed. "Have you believed because you have seen me?" And then, he Pastor John looks up from his notes, and with the kind demeanor of a loving pastor, points out into his church, and says, "Blessed are you, sisters and brothers, who have believed without seeing."

John's church is a lot like our church. Just a moment ago, we confessed, "Christ is risen!", yet we were not there. We echo their testimony of those who were there. We believe without seeing.

Yet sometimes, don't you wish you had more? An apparition of the risen Christ. A visit to heaven, proving to you, at least, that heaven is for real. Shoot, give me a plaster bust of Jesus' face. *Something* more.

We can look for proof...but we're not going to get it, not enough to satisfy. If the story is to be believed, the risen Christ has long ascended into heaven. All we have are these words, the testimony of witnesses. "We have seen the Lord!" they proclaim to us, through the centuries. But is that enough? No, if you're looking for proof today, you're not going to find it. The more you dig for proof, the more doubt surfaces.

But who said belief required proof? Who said faith did not *always* come to us wrapped in a package of doubt?

What in this story is believable? Dead being raised? It is unbelievable!

But isn't that's the point? Believing the *unbelievable*. Seeing what cannot be seen. Finding life in the midst of death. It makes no sense, yet this is our faith.

Believing the unbelievable: that you are not what you believe you are. That this world is not what we believe it to be. That violence and hate are not the only way. That justice will win. That death does not have the final say, though everything around us screams that it does.

Believing the unbelievable: That all around us--new life springing forth right out of the soil of death. Resurrection?!

It is unbelievable! Yet, for those who have witnessed it's presence, it is undeniable.

And we...we--are--blessed.

Amen.

**Instead of singing our communion hymn, we've asked Tim Ballard to sing a song for us called, "I Am Doubting Thomas." As we hear this testimony in song, let us prepare to come before the table of our Lord.**