

Invitation to Faith©

John 20:19-31

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Can anyone tell me where Thomas was from?

Hint: He had to see to believe.

He was from the U.S.

He was from Missouri! The “Show Me” state!

Not really. Actually, Thomas could be from anywhere because I think he represents many of us all over the world. We do have a difficult time believing in things we can't see. Our scientific minds demand proof and unfortunately, a great number of people today have decided that the stories of the Bible can't be true. The miracles could not have happened. The virgin birth sure couldn't have happened. The resurrection – how could that possibly be?

The disciple Thomas has been known through the ages as “Doubting Thomas” because he refused to believe that Jesus was really alive. But, don't you think he was given a bad rap? I mean, he was just asking to see the same proof that the other disciples had already seen the week before. That seems reasonable, doesn't it?

How many of us would love to see Jesus appear? To be able to see his face, his nail scarred hands and feet? To touch the hole in his side that was made from the spear? If we are honest, many of us would like to see him ... maybe just to firm up what we have – in great hope – believed.

When I was a little girl, I remember sitting in worship with my grandparents at the Presbyterian Church where we were members at the time. My mother was in the choir. My dad didn't go. My brother and I sat with our grandparents – one on one end and one on the other so we wouldn't poke each other and talk and get in trouble. I always played with Granddad's pocket watch, but I was listening to the sermon – at least this particular morning.

Reverend Scott was preaching from the Matthew 21 text where Jesus says “... if you have faith and do not doubt, ... you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and it will be done. ²² If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.” (Matthew 21: 21,22)

Well, I heard that and I knew exactly what I wanted to ask for. And it wasn't for a new bike or a new doll or anything material. I thought it was quite a good thing to ask for. And I believed. I believed in God with all my heart. I believed in Jesus. So, it seemed a sure thing that if I asked for Jesus to come to me and appear so I could see him and talk

to him in person, it would be done. So right then and there, during the prayer that followed the sermon, I prayed and asked my request, believing it would happen.

I went home and ate a quick lunch and went out to the meeting place that I had set – I envisioned Jesus and me on my swing set.

Well, I sat in my swing waiting for him until it started getting dark. And guess what? Jesus didn't show. He stood me up. A 7-year-old girl waiting for Jesus, believing he would come. But he didn't.

Or did he? No. I did not see him. I did not get to talk to him face to face; to hear his sweet, loving, tender voice answering all my child-like questions.

But, you know, I never stopped believing that Jesus was real or that Jesus was the Son of God, the Savior. In fact, even though I was disappointed, I think I still had a sense of his presence there. I honestly can't remember a time when I did not believe he was there.

But why would I still believe after being so sure he would come, I would see him with my own eyes, and talk to him, maybe even sit in his lap like in the pictures I looked at in my Bible – Jesus with the children.

I think some of the answer to that "why" is found in the first part of our text. We tend to get stuck on Thomas when there is truly so much more here.

John tells us when Jesus first came into the room with the disciples - the first time they saw the risen Lord – he breathed on them and said to receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised to send another Advocate (*paraklétos*, one who is "called alongside" someone) who would be with them forever. Now that Advocate, the Holy Spirit is breathed into them.

I really like that Greek word *Parakletos*. I like the meaning of it – one who is "called alongside" another.

I am so sure that it was the *Parakletos* along side me that day and every day in every situation I have been faced with that has given me that gift of faith even when I cannot see. What a precious gift Jesus gave!

But let's go back to look a little more at the text. Some people think Jesus was rebuking Thomas. They believe he scolded Thomas for having to see to believe. But, wasn't it more a real gift he gave Thomas?

Thomas had the testimonies of the other disciples and he could have just believed through their proclamation. But he needed more and Jesus gave it to him and then he invited Thomas to believe. He called him to faith.

I think Jesus understood Thomas' fears and confusion and need to have proof. It was one week after the most traumatic thing the disciples had ever experienced. They were locked in the room where they were hiding from the Jewish leaders, fearful for their own lives; afraid they might end up killed as Jesus was.

And maybe ... just maybe ... they were somewhat afraid of Jesus too. Think about it. They had all (but John) deserted him. They fled when Jesus was arrested. Peter, although he said he would never deny Jesus, found out he was not that strong. He denied him 3 times the very next morning.

The disciples ... Jesus' closest friends ... abandoned him when he needed them most. Can you imagine the guilt they felt? The pain and shame, mixed with great fear?

And yet, no locked door could keep the risen Christ from going to them and assuring them of his love; greeting them with a warm "shalom" – "a (Hebrew) blessing that means more than tranquility, but a deep and holistic sense of well-being -- the kind of peace the world cannot give." (Elizabeth Johnston, www.workingpreacher.com)

This is Jesus who forgives and who charges those forgiven to do likewise so others might come to believe as well. This is Jesus who wasn't finished with his ministry or with his disciples who would carry on that ministry.

This is Jesus who was resurrected from the dead by the power and love of God so that they too might be resurrected from their fear and guilt, their shame and confusion; that they might be transformed into ambassadors for Christ.

So what about you? What about us today? Does this passage speak to you in any way? Do you ever find yourself doubting? Wondering if it's all true? Do you find yourself sometimes wishing you had visible proof?

One week ago we joyfully celebrated Easter – the resurrection of Jesus Christ – the victory over sin and death – the promise of life eternal with God.

But I find that, while we speak of those faithful promises, there are times when we question; times when we doubt; when we want something more. Like when a loved dies and we believe in resurrection and we profess they are in heaven.

Yet those long dark lonely nights sometimes find us wondering. Where are you? Is it real? Is this really not the end?

I confess that I asked those questions out of my place of grief when my mother died. I longed to see her face, her smile, and to hear her voice and I wanted so badly to have some kind of sign ... some sure proof that death really wasn't the end.

I think doubts are part of being human. But the danger is that, in our struggle, we might close ourselves off to the possibility of the *Paracletos* – the one who walks beside us – the Holy Spirit – bringing our hopes back to faith again.

Jesus, I believe, continues to breathe on you ... to whisper to you in your fearful, lost, confused times of life – “Shalom! Peace. Peace and well being to you right in the midst of your awful, uncertain situation.”

And while he doesn't usually give us the benefit of seeing with our own eyes – touching his hands, his feet, his side – he invites us to faith and he blesses us for believing in what we cannot see.

But, we *do* have so much help. We have the testimonies of this amazing book of God's love – the Holy Bible. And whether you take every word, every story literally, or you read it as a metaphor – it *still* is a powerful witness to the love and grace of God, and to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Son.

John says that all these things are written so you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name!

We have the witness of the saints who have gone before us; we have the stories of the martyrs who also gave their lives for faith.

We have *this place* – that has witnessed to the faith for well over 150 years – where Christ shows up, whether we see him or not, and we would have to be in a coma to not sense the power of the Holy Spirit with us.

There are times when we feel it more than others. Once I said to Fred about my faith – “sometimes I just don't feel anything.” And he wisely answered that faith isn't all about a feeling. It is about believing even when we don't feel it.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who believe even when they have not seen me.” He invites us to be blessed; to believe; to have faith.

When we put our faith in him, even in those times that are difficult, he does show up. Jesus is here in the acts of love we experience with one another. Jesus appears in the faces of not only those who are helping young families in our baby pantry, but also in the faces of those whom we are helping.

Jesus appears in our youth as they prepare to go on a mission trip and in the leaders and in those whom they will be helping. Jesus said about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and visiting those who are sick and in prison if you have done it to these, you have done it to ME. We see Christ in those we care for.

We have signs all around. Signs of resurrection. Signs of the risen Lord.

Do not doubt. But believe. You are blessed! Be a blessing. Live the life of the one who sends you so others will see Christ in you ... and believe.

Amen.

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