

Stop Doubting and Believe

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. This is a reading from the Gospel according to John.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

After he said this, he showed them his hand inside. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again, Jesus said, Peace be with you.

As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that, he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven.

[1 : 0 8] If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. Now, Thomas, also known as? Didymus. One of the twelve was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord. But he said to them, Unless I see those nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

A week later, his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe, Thomas said to him. My Lord, my God.

Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed. Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which were not recorded in this book.

[2 : 1 2] But they were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and by believing, you may have life in his name.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Hey, good morning, Christ Church. Happy second Sunday of Easter. Do any of you ever put out, you know, your outfit for the next day?

You know, your first day of school, your first day at the new job. Anybody do that? So I've got an outfit planned for tomorrow, and I just wanted you to know what I'm going to be wearing when I wake up tomorrow.

Okay? I'm pretty excited about it. I'm pretty excited. Thanks to my neighbor, Elaine, for that awesome shirt. I just want to start by saying I'm so grateful to be your pastor, to serve in this place, in this role.

And I'm so grateful for our elders giving me this time to be away on the sabbatical and for our staff making that possible. Today, I feel like I'm crossing a finish line, a finish line from the past two years, which are kind of like dog years, and really the past eight years since my last extended time of Sabbath, and even the past 16 and a half years of just starting and sustaining Christ Church.

[3 : 38] And this finish line image has me thinking back to 2006. It's when we planted Christ Church, and it's also when I ran the Lake Tahoe Marathon.

If you are thinking about running this race, you should know that it's a little bit hilly, and it involves heavy breathing because something about mountains and altitude and whatnot.

So miles 15 to 19 in this race, you're running up to Emerald Bay and Inspiration Point. And then basically miles 20 to 26, which tend to be the hardest ones, I was in the woods.

There were no fellow runners. We were all spread out. There was no crowd there, people to cheer us on. There were no aid stations. There was no water.

There was no nothing out there. And I remember thinking to myself, I am going to die. If no one comes to help me, I'm going to die.

[4 : 37] I'm just going to be laying by the side of this trail, just a crumpled mass of human flesh, and bears are going to come eat me, and I'm going to end my life as a did-not-finish marathoner.

But my valiant wife, Catherine, she ran to my rescue. Literally, I don't know how she found me, and I don't know how far she ran, but she ran, and she brought me Gatorade.

She brought me some goo, and she was like, you got this. And, you know, I would have never made it out of the woods alive. I would have never made it across the finish line without her.

And some of you are like, duh. Generally speaking, we don't know where you would be without her. But I just want to thank the people who have helped me through the woods and to the finish line of these past two years.

Andrew, for sure. I don't even know where. He's disappeared. He's gone. He's making a video somewhere. I don't know where he is. But Jesse, our elders, our deacons, our staff, our volunteers.

[5 : 42] We have some volunteers here who work more than I do. Without your support and care and encouragement and counsel and accountability and prayers and faithfulness and generosity, I would not have been able to keep going.

And, in fact, some of our elders, that's just been their constant refrain. Keep going. Keep going. Keep going. Don't give up. You've got this. And that's just meant so much to me.

And it really takes all the parts of the body of Christ working together to get to where we are right now today. So thank you, Christ Church.

Thank you to the First Lady, Catherine. Thanks to my family. Thanks especially to Constance, Scott, and Walter.

No more church meetings at night for the next four months, okay? Woo! Woo! Woo! Yeah. Come on. So I love our Christ Church family. I love who we are.

[6 : 49] I love who we're becoming. I look forward to hearing about these next four months when I get back. So that's the sermon. All right. Yeah.

Don't be too excited. Now, I do need to preach. And so we'll get to the sermon proper here. Do you remember what it was that happened that Easter Sunday evening?

We talked about the morning last week, but the Easter Sunday evening. We're told in verse 19 that on the evening of that first day of the week when the disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, peace be with you.

And after this, he showed them his hands inside, and the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. So all the disciples were really excited about the resurrection, all except one.

In verse 24, it says, Thomas, one of the 12 was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, we've seen the Lord. But he said, unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

[7 : 58] So during this week after Easter, there are 11 surviving apostles. Ten of them are believers. One of them is not. And a major reason for Thomas' unbelief is simply pragmatic.

He was absent when Jesus met with the disciples on Sunday. And because he missed the meeting, he missed the blessing. Now, I had a little mini sermon here about the importance of regularly attending Sunday worship.

But I edited that in the interest of time. Plus, you all showed up today, so you don't need that sermon. So congratulations. And, you know, fortunately, Thomas did not repeat his absence and the blessing that he missed that first Sunday he got because he came back that second Sunday.

So it's appropriate for us to talk on the second Sunday of Easter about Thomas and to take a closer look at what happened. And John 20 tells us that the resurrected Jesus, he turns our unbelief into worship and our worship into mission.

That's what the risen Jesus does. He turns our unbelief into worship and our worship into mission. So let's think about this for a minute, how the risen Jesus turns our unbelief into worship.

[9 : 24] We're told in verse 26 that a week later, his disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. And though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

Thomas is confronted by this risen, and I imagine smiling, peacemaking, peace-offering Jesus. Can you imagine what was going on in his mind and in his heart?

All week, his friends have been saying, Tom, we have seen the Lord. And he's probably thinking, you know, could it be true? Isn't this just a devout wish, an ecstatic vision?

Aren't they just projecting their shattered hopes onto the screen of fantasy and inventing this resurrected Jesus in order to cope with their cruelly broken dream?

And maybe you're here today as a sincere inquirer, an honest seeker, and you're feeling hesitant, you're asking similar questions like, What sort of person are we dealing with here?

[10 : 26] Isn't this all just a bunch of myth and legend? Could it be that the crucified one is alive? Well, the Oxford English Dictionary defines the word doubt as a feeling of uncertainty and an undecided state of mind.

Now, does that apply to Thomas? Is Thomas uncertain and undecided? No. He's absolutely clear what he thinks, that the wounds of Jesus ended in death and the resurrection is not possible.

He says, I jolly well won't believe. And even if I did, I would have these massive conditions for believing. Unless I see, he says, the nail marks in his hands, and I put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

He's determined, like some of us are determined, not to be taken in. And he stands on his rights to not believe anything until he's got solid, empirical, verifiable evidence.

You are dead until you're proven alive. And I love what happens next. Verse 27, Then Jesus said to Thomas, Put your finger here, see my hands, reach out your hand and put it into my side, stop doubting and believe.

[11 : 46] Jesus gets straight to the point. He knows Thomas' exact conditions somehow, and he meets his requirements to the letter. He says, Thomas, try me.

Do your tactile investigation. Carry out your empirical verification. Satisfy all of your questions. Now, does Thomas put his finger into Jesus' hands?

Does he put his hand into Jesus' side? Does he probe Jesus' wounds the way that Caravaggio's famous painting suggests that he does?

We're not told. The text doesn't say. But I think when Thomas sees the wounds of this crucified sin bearer, and he sees the body of this resurrected death destroyer, he realizes the audacity of his conditions.

Unless I see, unless I touch, unless God, you'll explain this to me or promise that to me. God, I will believe you and I'll trust you and I'll obey you if you'll do X, Y, and Z.

[12 : 55] Any of us ever put conditions on God? God, I will or will not believe this, and I will or will not do that. That means you're trying to stay in control.

You're trying to stay in the driver's seat. You're trying to be God. And Jesus comes to Thomas, and he shows him his wounds in order to heal in him the wounds of his unbelief.

And Jesus says to him, Stop not believing. Do not persist in being an unbeliever. Start being a believer. And with those words, Thomas drops his conditions.

And he says in verse 28, My Lord and my God. I imagine Thomas falling to his knees and putting his face on the ground. This disciple who's been the most unbelieving gives this most breathtaking statement of strong and adoring belief.

He looks at this man who's recently died, whose wounds are still visible, and he says, You are Yahweh. You are God in the flesh.

[14 : 04] And he doesn't say, You are the Lord and you are the God. He says, You are my Lord and you are my God. There's this personal, individual, specific, experiential relationship of love and trust.

And he's probably thinking to himself, How can I be in the presence of one who has given himself utterly for me without giving myself utterly back to him?

Thomas is in the presence of life itself, and he's being filled with that life. And now he's talking with Jesus as if he is in the center where God deserves to be.

As if Jesus is this active, responsive person. And that's the question for us. Do you talk to Jesus that way? Do you treat Jesus this way as my Lord and my God?

To be a believer is to say to the living Jesus, You are my Lord and my God. And unless we can make this definite, precise confession that's focused on God's Son, we cannot really claim to be Christians.

[15 : 13] Some of us might say, Well, yeah, yeah, it's easy for Thomas to believe because he's there. But it's not easy for me because I wasn't there.

Well, Jesus doesn't see it that way, actually. It says that he gives Thomas what he demands, but he takes Thomas to task for demanding it, and he gives him this gentle, loving rebuke in verse 29 when he says, Because you've seen me, you've believed.

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. He's commending not faith without evidence, but faith without sight. Thomas, it should have been enough for you to hear the eyewitness testimony and the evidence of the apostles.

You knew that they were honest, sober, reliable people, not given to lies or hallucinations. In fact, if you were in a court of law and you had ten honest witnesses all testifying the same way, the verdict would be clear.

In fact, it would be unreasonable and even irresponsible to not believe what they're saying. And this is an encouragement to us who were not there, who would come in later generations, that faith is not wishful thinking.

[16 : 32] Faith is not a leap in the dark. Faith is not believing without evidence. Faith is this intellectually robust engagement with eyewitness evidence.

Jesus is blessing us for believing on the basis of this written testimony of the apostles in the New Testament who saw, heard, touched, and experienced the risen body of Jesus.

Faith is based on the testimony about the empirically verified, established historical fact that the crucified Jesus is alive.

So Jesus says, stop being an unbeliever. It's unreasonable to go against the evidence. It's absurd not to trust in the Son of God, especially when he's offering you eternal life.

Verse 31, these things, the Gospel of John, all these things 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.

[17 : 40] God's life, divine life, heavenly, eternal, abundant, everlasting life. The risen Jesus turns our unbelief into worship.

You guys with me? A little nod, a little something. Help me keep going. Okay. The risen Jesus turns our unbelief into worship, but he doesn't stop there.

He also turns our worship into mission. He turns our worship into mission. Any of you feel like, think like this label, doubting Thomas, is a bit of a misnomer, right?

Because based on what we just read, he's not doubting Thomas, he's believing Thomas. He's confessing Thomas. He's worshipping Thomas. In fact, he's evangelizing Thomas, disciple-making Thomas, church-planting Thomas.

There's only one apostle missionary who went outside the bounds of the Roman Empire, and that was Thomas. Thomas went to the east. He went to Persia, to Iraq, and Iran, and he kept going to Kerala on the southwest shores of India, and he would be martyred in 72 AD in Madras, or what is today known as Chennai.

[18 : 59] Why did he do that? Why did any of the apostles do that? Well, just as Jesus sent Mary Magdalene that Easter morning to share the good news with the apostles, so he sent the apostles this Easter evening to share his good news with the world.

And we assume that Jesus pulled Thomas aside and said, Hey, Tom, here's what you missed at last week's meeting. Let me bring you up to speed. And he shared with them the great commission that we find in verses 19 to 23.

And there I see six aspects, six facets of Jesus' ministry. And if you'll just allow me 30 minutes each, I think we could get to our nacho bar.

Sound good? The first aspect of this mission is the presence of the resurrected Lord of life. The one who says, I am sending you.

That I is the one who's conquered death. So is there anything else that he cannot do? We're told in verse 19 that on that evening when the disciples were together and the doors were locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you.

[20 : 11] Jesus walked through closed doors. He walked through locked doors. Now, he could have knocked. He could have rung the doorbell.

But instead, he just walks right in. Can you imagine? Why did he do this? Because he's demonstrating his powers. He's demonstrated the power of his new, glorified, transphysical, spiritually energized, immortal body, saying, Nothing can impede me.

Nothing can hold me back. Nothing can limit me. And when the disciples saw this in verse 20, they were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. I think they had a surge of wild delight because they were beholding the recreative power of God.

The one who claimed to be the resurrection and the life has emptied the tomb. He's brought death to death. What else can he not do? Can he not conquer the world?

That's the first aspect of the mission. But the second aspect of the mission is the peace that was won by Jesus' wounds on his cross. Two times here he says, Shalom.

[21 : 25] Shalom. And what action is he performing? What sign is he showing when he says that? He gives this word of God's peace, but he also gives the sign of his wounds.

Right? Verse 19, he says, Peace be with you. And after this he showed them his hands and his side. Basically saying, Look, these wounds of my crucifixion, these are death-defeating, life-giving, peace-making, shalom-creating wounds.

Do you want to have peace with God? Do you want to have peace in your mind, peace in your heart, peace in the world? Ponder the wounds. Study the scars.

Meditate on the marks of my decisive battle with evil and sin, because this is how you have the peace of God.

It's a hard-won peace. It's a blood-bought peace. And just a heads up, that if you're going to follow me as a peacemaker in this world, you too are going to encounter evil.

[22 : 36] You too are going to suffer. You too are going to bear the marks of my wounds and my cross. But as you do, remember the words I spoke to you in that upper room.

John 16, Jesus says, I've told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you're going to have trouble. But take heart.

I've overcome the world. The third aspect of this mission is the model of the way that the Father sent Jesus. Verse 21, he says, peace be with you.

And then he says, as the Father sent me, I am sending you. And that word as is key because our mission to the world is modeled on Christ's incarnation.

The Father sent his Son not to stay safe in the immunity of heaven. Rather, he emptied himself of his glory and he entered our world.

[23 : 33] He entered our nature. He took it upon himself so that he could experience our sorrows and bear our sins and die our death. Jesus identified himself with us completely.

And that means that our mission is to identify ourselves with others. To put ourselves in loving sympathy inside of their doubts.

Inside of their questions. Inside of their loneliness and their needs and their desires. Just as Jesus did for us. And when he did that, when he came among us, how did he carry out his mission?

What was his pattern? You guys are sick of us saying this, but it bears repeating. Jesus would look up to his Father. He would look into the disciples whom he was training to make disciples.

And he would look out to the crowds who needed to hear him and be healed by him. He looked out to the people he wanted to touch and teach. He was always looking out to show and tell the gospel.

[24 : 39] In deeds of compassion and words of truth. And Jesus is saying, as the Father sent me to live this up, in and out life. So I am sending you to reproduce that life in you.

And to replicate it in other people. Fourth aspect of mission. I'm going fast, so don't worry. We got nachos. The fourth aspect of mission is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Can you imagine if Peter, James, and John had gone out on their own and in their own power? I'm thinking they're looking around in this moment. Jesus has just said he's sending them out. And everybody's looking at Peter like, hey, didn't he just deny you?

They're looking at James and John like, weren't they just arguing about who's the greatest among us? You're sending them? But Jesus, it says in verse 22, it says that with that he breathed on them.

And he said, receive the Holy Spirit. Receive the Holy Spirit. You might think back to Genesis 2 where God breathed life into Adam. Or you might think to Exodus or Ezekiel 37 where God breathed life into that valley of dry bones and formed them into a holy army.

[25 : 57] That's what Jesus is doing right here. He says, you must receive my resurrection life through the Holy Spirit by whose power alone the mission can be carried out. Because mission without the Holy Spirit is a contradiction.

Mission without the Holy Spirit is an impossibility. But I'm sending you out not as ambassadors of an absent king. I'm sending you out with my sacred breath on your faces.

I'm sending you with my Holy Spirit in your hearts. I'm sending you with my life dwelling in you. So when you go, remember that the Spirit of Jesus will be the one to drive the words of Jesus into the hearts and minds and consciences and wills of the people who are listening to you.

And remember that it's the Holy Spirit who convicts sinners of sin and who bears witness to Jesus and who enables anyone to say, Jesus is Lord.

It's the Holy Spirit's job to bring about the new birth from above, to assure us that we're the children of God, and to conform us to the image of Jesus.

[27 : 04] That's not our job. That's his job. Our job, church, is to be full of the Spirit. Our job is to rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen?

The fifth aspect of mission is our great privilege to proclaim the forgiveness of God. Verse 23, Jesus says, If you forgive the sins of anyone, their sins are forgiven, and if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.

The apostles and the apostolic church are sent out as messengers of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And we are to preach the gospel of salvation with authority and with power, and we're to tell people the terms upon which they are forgiven of their sins.

That is, we're to declare the good news of Jesus' life, crucifixion, and resurrection, and we're to tell people that God's forgiveness comes only to those who will repent and believe, who will turn from themselves and trust in Jesus.

Now, this is a high privilege, and it's also a high responsibility. Because with it comes the responsibility to warn people that self-centeredness is a serious and deadly disease.

[28 : 22] And that to remain in your sin will bring death and judgment. We're to tell people how wonderful it is for God to remove the sin off of you by the blood of Jesus, but we're also told, we're also to tell people how awful it is to die under the curse of sin and not be forgiven.

John chapter 3, right after that most famous verse, John 3, 16, it says, Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

But Jesus says two chapters later, he says, Very truly, I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged, but is crossed over from death to life.

And these great promises and these great warnings, that if you refuse Jesus, you'll be condemned, and if you accept Jesus, you'll be acquitted. That's been entrusted to us.

And there's a sixth aspect of mission. The presence of the resurrected Lord of life. The peace won by Jesus' wounds on the cross.

[29 : 35] The model of the way that the Father sent the Son. The power of the Holy Spirit. The privilege to proclaim the forgiveness of God. And the last thing, number six.

Jesus says, Not I am sending you singular. He says, I am sending y'all. It's in the Greek.

He said it in Aramaic. He was in southern Israel, so he must have said it that way. I am sending y'all. This is not a task assigned to isolated, autonomous individuals.

It is, in fact, an identity conferred upon a community. Jesus launches his church as a movement into the public life of the world to draw all people to Christ, who has cosmic authority and universal power.

And our job, Christ's church, is simply to show the world in our life together what it means to submit to the lordship of Jesus and how good it is.

[30 : 45] And to share with other people our joy and our freedom and to say, come on in, y'all. The water is fine. Come and taste and see that the lord is good.

This, friends, is Christ's mission for his church. It's what moved Thomas from the Middle East to India. It's what compelled him to go from the safety and comfort of Jerusalem out to the place where he would die in Chennai.

And I hope it's what will move you as well. As you're studying and teaching at the number one public university in the world, go Bears. The Athens of the West.

As you're working in this urban triangle of Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco. As you're living among friends, neighbors, and colleagues in the East Bay, I hope that you will move out into these spaces as a people who are sent.

A sent people. As the father sent me, so I am sending y'all. You've been sent to live out Christ's mission in Christ's way.

[31 : 51] And I just want to celebrate as we come to our 16th birthday as a church, thanking the lord that he sent me here. I don't deserve to be here.

Thanking the lord that he sent you here. You don't deserve to be here either. Thanking the lord that he's put us together at this time and given us the privilege to be part of this mission past, present, and dare I say future.

I hope we'll have many celebrations to come. Assuming you'll have me back. Assuming Andrew doesn't work me out of a job. This is my prayer for us.

That the risen Jesus would turn our unbelief into worship, passionate worship. And that the risen Jesus would turn our worship into mission.

Sacrificial mission. May he do it in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.