

A Question of Seeing

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you for your word, and we ask that your Holy Spirit will work through this word tonight, that he will work among us, so that you create faith within us, so that we understand our relationship with Jesus, who is both Lord and God, and that you use us for your great glory.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Please be seated. Well, it's great to be back with you again. My name is Dan Gifford.

I'm one of the clergy on staff, often in the morning service, and it's good to be here again with you after being here last month, too, and it's good to see some people I haven't seen for a long time. Great to see you, Andrew, after a very long time. Welcome back. And by the way, Andrew, another Andrew, Andrew Connert's birthday is today, too, so it's great to celebrate all together this birthday. All right? If you have not been here for a long time, we are in the very end of a little sermon series on the Gospel of John, and it's been very good going through it.

[1 : 10] This passage that we heard tonight that Claire read is a marvelous passage. If you have ever struggled with belief in God or belief in Jesus in your life, if you perhaps have never believed in God in your life, if you have gone through times of very low, in a sense, spiritual desert time, this is a passage that's for you because it spotlights Thomas who wrestled with faith, who went through a really spiritually down time in this passage.

That poor guy, Thomas, has been poor, very unfairly labeled, I think. He's had bad PR for the last 2,000 years. He's known as Doubting Thomas.

And he's called that because he did not believe when Jesus rose from the dead when he first heard the news. And that's unfortunate that he has that name because if we look at him, he is much more than that.

He's spotlighted three times in the Gospel of John. And when you see what he's like, you could probably call him more like practical Thomas or down-to-earth Thomas or something like real-life Thomas or probably a bit of pessimistic Thomas.

He's got a little bit of Eeyore in him as well. If you remember back in John 11 when Jesus wanted to go see Lazarus, Lazarus had died.

[2 : 47] He's going to go down there. And it's near Jerusalem where the disciples knew it was going to be quite dangerous to go down. There would be risk. St. Thomas says, after Jesus said, I'm going there, he says, well, let's go with him and we'll all die there.

Worst case scenario, Thomas. And then the next thing that happens in John 14 is that it's the night before Jesus dies and they're in the upper room. And Jesus announces to the disciples that he's going to his father's house to prepare a place for all of them.

And then Jesus says, and you know the way where I am going. And Thomas says, no, we don't. Where's the way that you're going?

How do we know? And Jesus has this most memorable verse in John. He says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.

Practical Thomas we have to thank for what Jesus said there. And Thomas, I think, most certainly would have believed if he was there that night when Jesus appeared to all the other disciples.

[3 : 55] But he wasn't there. And I think tonight we should all be very grateful that he wasn't. Because his doubt, his problems, his skepticism, and his then meeting with Jesus a week later teaches us a lot about faith.

And it's tremendously encouraging too. All of us put our faith in something. Every one of you, every one of us in the world have cherished beliefs.

But throughout the gospel, John talks about one type of belief over and over again. And that is belief in Jesus. And he says that everything in life depends on that belief.

And what he shows is that Jesus makes the most amazing claims about himself by his teaching and his miracles. And then people are invited to say, what do you think about that?

How do you respond to Jesus? What will you do about him and what he has done? Do you believe in what he has just said? That is the crucial question of the gospel of John.

[5 : 07] Because to believe in Jesus means life forever. But not to believe means that death will prevail in your life.

Spiritual death now and eventually physical death will have the last word in your life. Belief is crucial. Belief in Jesus.

And so Thomas is really helpful to us because his doubting about what his friends said about Jesus rising from the dead and then coming to belief helps us to understand what belief in Jesus is all about.

And this account that was just read really answers three critical questions about faith. It answers the question, what is faith? It answers the question, how do you get faith?

And then it answers the question, what comes to me through faith? What do I get from faith? So I want to talk about that first question. What is faith?

[6 : 09] There is a week in Thomas' life which must have been incredible. Because we see a process that leads to faith. Look at verse 25.

Thomas is practical.

Thomas is practical. He has accepted that it's all over. And it's painful to him that it's all over. His hopes have been dashed. And he is grieving.

He has put it behind him. I'm just boldly facing what happens next. And so he tells them, unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my fingers in the marks of the nails and place my hand into his side, I will never ever believe.

You see, Thomas is saying that a risen Jesus is completely outside my experience. I need solid evidence that the one I knew who I saw crucified is actually alive.

[7 : 19] And I'll never believe unless I am convinced of that fact. Now, we don't know what went on during that next week. Thomas is probably still filled with grief.

Certainly, he and the disciples are all filled with fear because they don't know if they're going to be arrested. But he certainly was wrestling with the testimony of his friends.

He must have said something like, how could it possibly be true? And in the incredibly unlikely event that it is true, what does it mean? What does it mean for us and for the world?

What does it mean? And after a week, his disciples, Jesus' disciples and Thomas are gathered again. They're in a room that is locked because they are afraid of being arrested.

And Jesus came and stood among them. Even though the door is locked, the walls are solid. And he greets them with these words that they had heard him say many, many times, maybe every day.

[8 : 23] It's what Hebrew speakers still say today, that he said, peace be with you. Peace be with you. Now, I think probably just hearing those words that were so familiar were enough to convince Thomas that this was his friend that had died on the cross.

But Jesus goes further. He speaks directly to Thomas. And notice when he appears to people, he, like with Mary, is very personal.

And he looks at Thomas and says, put your finger here and see my hands. Put your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.

Now, those are Thomas' exact words. Jesus knew exactly what was going on in Thomas' heart and his mind when he was doubting, when he was struggling with that faith.

And he invited him to do exactly what Thomas had asked for so that he could move from disbelief to belief in the risen Lord Jesus. But Thomas is already convinced.

[9 : 34] And he replied in the most marvelous way. These words, which are the most shining example of faith in the whole Bible. He said, my Lord and my God.

Well, that says it all. It says what faith is all about. Jesus, you are my Lord. You are my God.

Thomas is exclaiming with all of his heart and his mind that the essence of faith is this conviction that Jesus is your Lord, that he is your God.

That's what belief in faith is. In fact, it's something worth writing down. Faith is a conviction that Jesus is my Lord and my God.

And what that shows us, what Thomas shows us, is that faith is something intensely personal. You cannot avoid the personal aspect of faith.

When God works in my heart, it becomes something that's not just an objective truth that's there, even though it is. It becomes real and precious to me that I have a relationship with the living Jesus. [10:46] You know, I know in my head the real evidence that Jesus has risen from the dead and is Lord and God. But this is also the one now who I love and serve with all my heart.

Our faith is personal because God is very personal for us. He died for us. Jesus rose for us. And he delights in hearing us say, My God and my Father. Now, perhaps you can relate to Thomas today and at other times in your life.

Thomas went through anguish of doubt. He felt let down with the awful events that he saw happen to Jesus. And he said, I'll never believe. He was grieving incredible loss of his faith.

And he really struggled with that faith over the week. And yet he ends up with this shining expression of what it means to believe in Jesus that we're talking about today.

[11:45] And I think it's often true that those who have really wrestled with their faith, and I mean honestly wrestling, not hiding behind questions, but asking questions and earnestly desiring to find the answer, those who have wrestled with faith often have a clearer grasp of faith than those who walk easily into faith and belief.

There's a clarity about what they know and believe about Jesus Christ. And while we might not all have a crisis of faith like Thomas, I think it's really good for all of us to really think through what are the implications of our faith.

Do I have a personal faith in Jesus? What does Jesus say about himself? And do you believe it? Why do I believe?

And to really wrestle with those questions in your own study of the Bible, in the study that you have with other people. Maybe it's in taking catechism or your own personal reading.

Certainly in your prayers. Wrestle with your faith. Really think about what it means that Jesus says what he says about himself and that he rose again. I remember doing this for the first time when I was 16 or 17 years old.

[13:05] I grew up in a Christian home, which I am very grateful for. And I heard the gospel clearly all through my life until then. But at that age, I really didn't feel like I had an assurance that God had really saved me.

And I remember talking with Christians my age and adults as well. I remember reading books and I remember especially searching through the Bible to see how could I know for sure that I have an eternal relationship with God.

What could I do to guarantee that? Well, in the end, after this wrestling for a time, I came to realize that my confidence had to be in Jesus Christ.

And in him alone, in him being able to do for myself what I could not possibly do. I came to this understanding that it had to be Jesus who was strong to save because I wasn't.

And to understand that his love is far greater than my sin. And I think a lot of that wrestling that I went through had to do with making my parents' faith my own faith.

[14:19] So that it wasn't a second-hand faith anymore, but something that really was something I owned. And just for a little bit of an aside, if you are a Christian parent who have teenage children, this is very common, that they will wrestle with faith, that they will wrestle and understand, how is this faith my own faith?

What does it mean? What are the implications? Can I commit myself to it? And God will bring his goodness through that. I think often parents need to have faith and trust God and to pray for their children in this process.

But God blesses that work for great good. You know, it's true that the Christian life is life together. We meet together. We serve together.

We grow in faith together. We encourage each other. But there's a very personal aspect to being a Christian as well. And that's why we do have to wrestle and make faith our own.

We have to consider who Jesus is and receive him personally. Commit ourselves to him individually. We must say to God, we say to him in our hearts and minds, you are my God.

[15:32] You are my Lord. And this is an ongoing work that God does in us. So that renews our faith day by day. And so that's the first thing.

Faith is the conviction that Jesus is my Lord and my God. Now secondly, the last two questions are briefer. Where does faith come from?

How do we get it? Well, very clearly, in this passage, we see that faith comes from hearing those who saw the risen Lord, who were eyewitnesses of him.

Look at verse 29. Jesus says to Thomas, You see, Thomas was able to see and touch and hear Jesus.

And so he believed. And we might be a bit jealous of him for that. He had earthly, real evidence that led to his real and personal belief.

[16:35] But Jesus speaks for all of you today, and me today as well, when he blesses those who do not see and yet believe. And the blessing that he gives, a big part of it, is that he gives evidence for faith in the real earthly testimony of people like Thomas who did see him and who speak of him.

God uses that eyewitness evidence to create faith, to bring newness in our life for those who will listen. It's a very powerful work that God does through that eyewitness testimony.

Did you notice that Jesus gave a bit of rebuke to Thomas when he was talking to him? He said to him, Have you believed because you have seen me?

In other words, you should have listened to your friends who said, I have seen the Lord. You should have trusted their word because they are God's gift to the world.

Because through their word and testimony, he has brought faith to millions and millions of people throughout history. You see, the reason Jesus appeared to Thomas is so that he would be the one who would see Jesus risen, and he would tell the world about him.

[17:57] And it's God's great gift to us that he gives that testimony, that eyewitness testimony in this world, because in hearing and receiving it, we will have a living faith.

Yes, Jesus brought Thomas from disbelief to belief, but he also made him one who testifies as an eyewitness of Jesus. Now, some of you may not know that yesterday was Earth Day.

And not only was it Earth Day, but it was the first day that scientists demonstrated on behalf of science.

So it's the first science day as well. And the purpose of that day was that scientists march because of the fact that they feel that science is under attack right now, especially by certain governments in the world.

And they are calling for a renewed trust in real hard evidence. One leading scientist in that demonstration, and they were all over the world, by the way, she said this.

[19:05] She was one who was a leading scientist for genetic research. She says, This is what she said.

And when she said that, I thought of faith in Jesus Christ, living faith. Because true belief also values facts and truth and data.

And this is why the eyewitness testimonies are so important for us. That's why God gives us those testimonies in God's Word. John puts it really well in a letter that he wrote.

1 John 1. He says this, That's hard evidence.

That's down to earth. And Peter said something very similar in one of his letters. He said, For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

[20:39] You see what John and Peter are saying? They're not saying believe in Jesus because we believe. No, they are saying believe in Jesus because we have seen him.

We have seen him. We have seen him. And we have handled him. Christianity is not, first of all, a philosophy or a teaching. You know, all the books in the world could not hold that in any way. It is fundamentally about a person. Fully God and fully man who rose from the dead. Who real people saw and touched and heard.

You know, Jesus, God could only reveal himself in a person who is God and man. And that's why those eyewitness testimonies are all important.

He uses that testimony to powerfully create in us a personal and living faith. And for you and I today, Jesus will always bless your sincere search for faith.

[21:40] He will use that. He will bring his answers to the honest questions as you look into that eyewitness testimony. As you read the testimony of Jesus in the Bible, you will see Jesus and his truth everywhere as you're looking through it.

It reminds me a little bit about my experience last Christmas. Where I wanted to surprise my son Alexander with a tripod for his camera.

I wanted to get a really good one that was right for him. So I did lots of research on the internet. But there was a problem that came with that research. I couldn't go on the internet after doing this without ads for those tripods showing up over and over and over again.

Every website that I went on. And unfortunately, it meant that every time my son took a quick peek at what I was doing on the computer or used it, one of those tripods came up.

And so he was inevitably seeing the evidence of my research. Now, when he received that tripod on Christmas Day, I've got to tell you, he was very pleased to receive it.

[22 : 50] But he was also not surprised at all. And by the way, after the service this morning, a lot of people told me how I can avoid that. So I know. I know how to get rid of pop-up ads now.

But this is a lot like the evidence for the risen Jesus being Lord and God. It pops up all over the Bible as you read it. You see who he is.

And God will confirm that in your prayers and in your conversations with others as you serve him. That Jesus is both Lord and God. And that he belongs to you and you belong to him.

Even though you don't see Jesus, God can and he will bless you with personal belief in Jesus as you hear and as you read his word.

You will see Jesus in that way. And so we've heard about what faith is. It's the conviction that Jesus is my Lord and my God.

[23 : 52] We've heard that faith comes from the eyewitness, from hearing the eyewitness testimony of Jesus. Lastly, what does faith do? What does it do? Well, very simply, faith brings life.

It actually gives you the true experience of the true God. Look at the end of our passage today.

Verse 31. John could have written books and books and books that would fill all the libraries in the world with the things that Jesus did.

But he said, I've written these signs. These are written. What I've put in these 21 chapters. These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

And that by believing you may have life in his name. You see, belief brings life. Jesus wants you to believe not just for the sake of having faith, but that so you can share God's life forever.

And that you can know that life now. That's what he wants for you more than anything else. And belief in him is the only belief in the world that saves you and actually brings you into God's life.

[25 : 10] You know, we found in the hard way in the church in the 20th and 21st century that when the church stops believing that Jesus rose from the dead and that he is your Lord and your God, that there can be no life.

There can be no power. There can be no hope. People's lives are not transformed. No one grows in their relationship with Jesus. And the church can only bless the world in a superficial way.

But when people take on the faith that Thomas had in the end, God brings them real life. He changes their minds and their hearts.

He brings them into the life of God. And in fact, your life is turned right upside down. And the living Jesus blesses the world through you. That's what happened to Thomas.

You know, Jesus restored Thomas so completely with this new and living faith that he became one of the great missionaries. Did you know that he started the church in Syria?

[26 : 13] And in Iran? And in northern Afghanistan? And in India as well? In fact, if you go to Madras, India, you can go to the cathedral there and you can see the tomb where they think Thomas is.

And on the tomb at the top it says, my Lord and my God. At least that's what the photograph in Wikipedia shows me. But what through Thomas, thousands of people throughout the known world came to know the risen Jesus because of his testimony.

And one of the great evidences of the reality of Jesus' resurrection is that people like Thomas were immediately willing to die for their faith, to have their lives completely inconvenienced and turned upside down, and go to great lengths to share the faith of Jesus, the risen Jesus.

And that's why right at the beginning of chapter 1, verse 12 in John, Jesus writes about life.

About life that comes through belief. He says this, To all who did receive Jesus, who did believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

[27 : 27] And that's because it is a new life that he gives to us. The life of a child of God. It is a life where you are committed to Jesus' cause. Where you're committed to Jesus' truth.

Where you're committed to Jesus' church. And to what he is about in this world. That kind of faith really makes you a sent one.

Maybe not to India or to the Middle East, but certainly to your friends. Certainly to your family. To your school or workplace. Or to the neighborhood that God has sent you to.

And so as we leave this passage, may God the Holy Spirit work very powerfully in your life through the eyewitnesses in the Bible.

May he continually deepen your faith in Jesus so that you can live that life of a child of God.

Testifying to the truth that Jesus is risen from the dead.

[28 : 29] He is both Lord and God. Who alone forgives sin and brings new life. And he asks you and me today, Is Jesus your Lord?

Is Jesus your God? Amen. Amen. Amen.