

KNOW, TRUST, BELIEVE
John 20:19-31; Acts 4:32-35

Every year on the first Sunday after Easter we read this story about Jesus, his disciples, and Thomas. That's remarkable and very unusual! After all, our scripture readings each Sunday are based on a three-year cycle. Each year focuses on a different Gospel. This year it is Luke, next year will be Matthew, and the year after that will be Mark. Then it will be Luke again. Selections from John are interspersed throughout each year. But this story is one of the only texts that is read each year, always on this Sunday. Why is it so important for us to hear this story every year, right after we have celebrated the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning?

During my youth and through much of my adult life I thought that this story was a cautionary tale, a warning. "Don't be like Thomas!" He was "doubting Thomas", the skeptic. He was not in the room when Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening and showed them his wounded hands and side to prove who he was. So Thomas declared that he would only believe when he saw the same proof. When Jesus appeared again on this day, one week after Easter, he offered Thomas the same proof, and said, "Do not doubt, but believe." Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God".

Then Jesus said to him, "You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet believe." Preachers told us that Thomas should have believed the other disciples when they told him that Jesus had been raised from the dead. We were warned **not to be like Thomas**. We should not demand proof, but believe what we were told about Jesus.

During our lifetime, Thomas has been rehabilitated. Gradually sermons about Thomas changed their tone and focus. We were reminded that all of the other disciples had the same confusion and doubts as Thomas until they saw the wounded hands and side of Jesus. So the doubts that Thomas had were reasonable. Jesus honoured Thomas's demand to see and touch. Jesus offered Thomas the same evidence that everyone else had been given. So we should not feel guilty about our skepticism. We were freed us from the dreaded demand that we should have "blind faith". Our skepticism was a virtue, even a doorway to trust, obedience, and adoration. **We could be like Thomas**.

During the rehabilitation of Thomas, the responsibility for his doubt shifted from him to the other disciples. The disciples claimed that Jesus was alive and yet they remained huddled in fear in rooms with locked doors. What was Thomas to think? Where was the evidence that the power of God has been miraculously unleashed? As far as Thomas could tell, nothing had changed.

The Bible records that Jesus had blessed his disciples and breathed the Holy Spirit on them during that first visit. Then why were those disciples hiding in a dark room, confused and uncertain about what to do next? Thomas could be excused for saying that he would not believe that Jesus was alive until he had seen Jesus himself.

So there could be three themes, “three takeaways” from this story.

Doubting Thomas. We should **not** be like him.

Seeking Thomas. He asked for proof. Jesus offered it to him. We **can** be like Thomas.

Confused and fearful disciples. They had seen and been blessed by Jesus, but their lives showed no evidence that Jesus had been raised from the dead. We should **not** be like **them**.

Is that it? Is this a story about doubt and certainty? Is that why we read this story every year right after Easter?

No, there's something more and it puts the story into a larger perspective.

Before the story ends we hear the voice of an author in a way that we rarely hear it anywhere else in the Bible. That voice comes to us from 50-75 years after the events in the story. The voice is speaking to people who had probably never been to Jerusalem and had never met a disciple of Jesus. People like us.

*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. (John 20:30-31)*

The Gospel writer was providing proof to people who never saw Jesus and never meet any of the witnesses to the resurrection. These people needed something else. What they were offered were the stories of Jesus.

Throughout the next 2000 years these stories have been the main way in which we know Jesus. These stories of Jesus are what we listen to every week when we gather to worship. Some of us also read them every day. They have been translated into more than 3,300 languages. When we gather here to worship we have an empty cross and an open Bible. We are people of the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, and the story.

We are also the body of Christ, the ongoing evidence that Jesus lives. That is why every year on this Sunday the story of Jesus, the disciples, and Thomas, is paired with another story from Acts. This year we heard how the disciples testified before a tribunal, declaring that they were witnesses that God had exalted Jesus. Next year it will be Peter, on Pentecost, announcing, “This Jesus, God raised up, and all of us are witnesses of that.” The year after that it will be the story of how the first community of believers shared their possessions and testified with great power that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

What is so important in this story that we need to hear it every year, right after we have celebrated the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning?

It reminds us that there are three ways to encounter the resurrected Christ.

EXPERIENCE – The first followers of Jesus experienced him first hand as the risen Christ. Since then there have been many people who have experienced Jesus in dreams, visions, or healings. They have an inner certainty that Jesus lives. They bow in adoration with Thomas and say, “my Lord and my God.” They sing with beauty and confidence, “I **know** that my redeemer lives.”

WITNESS – Throughout history there have been countless people who have encountered Jesus through his followers, the church. The witness of Christians in words and actions has been compelling evidence of the living Christ. People put their **trust** in Christ because they **trust** the followers of Christ. As we know, the integrity of the followers of Christ can be a strong bond or a broken thread.

STORY – Christians regard the Bible as the living word of God. The tremendous commitment to translate and distribute the Bible is based on the conviction that through it people will encounter the living God and the resurrected Jesus. The story is compelling and transformative. It “**rings true**”, even if it is often far-fetched and improbable. Like other profound stories across human cultures it is “truer than history”. It shapes lives, collective consciousness, and society. Those who encounter Jesus through the Bible and believe are the fulfillment of the hope and promise of the author of John. They are blessed and have life in the risen Christ.

This is Easter season. This is the season of transforming encounters with the living Christ. This is the season of deep personal experiences of God’s presence. This is the season in which living witnesses declare God’s triumph of life over death in their words and actions. This is the season when the Word of truth grows and flourishes within us, making us and all things new.

WE KNOW. WE TRUST. WE BELIEVE IT IS TRUE.

This is the good news. This is the Gospel. Christ is risen!