

### **“Stop Doubting, and Believe”**

This is a story about how we are moved to faith. What does it take for us to respond to Jesus, and through him to God?

Even though the disciples heard from Mary that she had seen the Lord, they locked themselves away in a room for fear of the Jews. Even after everything Jesus told them and after everything he said would happen happened, they still needed more. They rejected verbal witness and needed proof. It wasn't until Jesus came to them and they had actual, visual confirmation that their fear turned to joy. It wasn't until Jesus shared a meal with them that they saw him.

Now we get to Thomas, traditionally this disciple is pointed to as the epitome of doubt. What he voiced out loud, however, was nothing more than what the other disciples were feeling. In verse 25 we read, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my fingers in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” He too sought visual confirmation of the miracle of resurrection.

Therefore, we see in verse 27, when Jesus came to the disciples a second time, a week later, he invites Thomas to do exactly that. “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

We are reminded here, and this is important, that doubt, and skepticism does not mean we lose our place in God's kingdom. God, through Jesus, comes to us and willingly reveals God's self – wounded hands and side – so we might believe. It is okay to doubt, everyone does from time to time, but if we wait, watch, and listen – God's nature is revealed.

This text does not offer us evidence that Thomas actually touched Jesus, but his response saying “My LORD and my God” establishes evidence of his faith. This statement – My Lord and my God, is the most powerful confession and acknowledgement of who Jesus is in the Gospels. Finally, Thomas gets it, in Jesus he indeed meets his God – our God, a personal God. The God that John introduces us to in the very opening of his Gospel – The Word was GOD!

All of this happens through faith – we are not first-generation disciples, we were not eye-witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. Consequently, it is by faith alone that we believe. Thomas exhibits to us genuine faith, he did not have to touch Jesus to believe. We too do not need to touch Jesus to have faith. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Here the words Jesus speaks to Thomas indicate an awareness that this Good News would spread.

Now, in verses 30 & 31, John explains why he writes what he writes in this Gospel. We should understand that this is not a letter written to one of the churches that had been established. This is written so that all readers, all Christians, would believe. John 1:18 tells us that the purpose of Jesus' ministry is to make God known. “No one has ever seen God, but God, the one and only, who is at the Father's side (or close to the Father's heart), has made God known”. Jesus makes God known.

The writer of this Gospel, possibly the disciple John, writes to us with a purpose that we would come to faith, or be increased in our faith, through Jesus as the Son of God. Through that faith

we might be in the kingdom and possess eternal life in Jesus' name. This means that all who believe can enter the kingdom, but the writer of this gospel is careful to ensure that what he writes leads to a true belief that Jesus is the Word, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This speaks of an eternal relationship and points the reader directly to God who is made known in Jesus. Belief in Jesus is belief in God.

The dictionary defines faith as the complete trust or confidence in someone or something. We say we have faith in Jesus, in God, but is this complete trust? How hard it is for us to do that, completely trust anyone or anything, in this world our trust is damaged bit by bit over time. Some of us have faith in governments, money, spouses, is that the same thing? Probably not – our faith in God must be rooted in something deeper, a relationship that stands the test of time. Secular things like governments, money, and even spouses will almost always let us down, weakening our faith. But if we look and listen, we know in our hearts that God does not let us down, even if we feel let down we see that he is always with us. God stays faithful to us if we permit.

Faith is not just about conversion, we can't simply state "sure I believe" then go on with our lives as usual. It's like this, a student once purchased a new mechanical pencil. After some time he found himself in the middle of an important test, and his pencil ran out of lead! There was a great deal of frustration and anguish as he wasted precious minutes going around to other students trying to borrow another pencil. Later the student found out that his new pencil was designed with a complete supply of extra lead inside that could be dispensed with a mere press of the button.

Christians are often like this student: Although they have all of God's sufficiency available to them, because of lack of knowledge they do not draw on it in their time of need. Faith must be linked to knowledge to be exercised and to grow. Faith grows and brings us power only through a relationship with Christ and that relationship must be nurtured and schooled by fellowship with other believers. We cannot isolate ourselves, like the disciples did in fear, and expect our faith to grow. We have to let Jesus come to us through the relationships we have with other believers and even with non-believers because those relationships will help us see how blessed we are in Christ.

I am going to change direction – how does having faith keep us from Sin? Let's go back to verse 23 and read it again – "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

I think John, in this Gospel and in his letters, talks about two kinds of sin. There is the Sin with a capital S that Sin is, according to John, not a "moral category of behavior" it is a "theological category about one's response to the revelation of God in Jesus". We get an idea of this from reading John 19:11 "Jesus answered him [Pilate], "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore, the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." Indicating that they are far more guilty because they claim to know God yet refuse to acknowledge God revealed in Jesus. Therefore, it is through Jesus, or rather the revelation of God in Jesus that Sin (that is singular sin with a capital S) is removed from the world. Read John 1:29 – "The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the World!"

Jesus removed Sin from the world by revealing God to the world. Jesus was the ultimate sacrificial lamb, his blood cleanses us from all sins. Jesus life, death, burial, and resurrection serves to reveal the true nature and power of God. Through Jesus God is revealed and we can enter into a relationship of faith and Sin, with a capital S is removed from the world. Jesus takes away the SIN of the world.

The word SIN used here, refers to the world's collective alienation from God and each other. It is this Sin from which there is no forgiveness – in my mind the sin of refusing to see God, refusing to accept Jesus and refusing to believe, is the SIN with a capital S from which there is no return – until Jesus is allowed into your life.

This kind of sin, John talks about in his letters as well, 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:4-10:

“Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way; all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.”

This reveals that sin is the rejection of Christ – a true believer does not reject Christ and does not sin in that sense. It's important to remember that one cannot enter into the eternal kingdom if one rejects Christ. Salvation is not possible without Christ.

Now, there are some who will argue, “what about a person who lives a good life, never harming another, always loving their neighbor, always giving and helping.” My response is this – if someone learns who God is through Jesus, learns of the offer of salvation and eternal life through Jesus, and rejects that offer, it does not matter how well they lived their life. If you consciously reject Jesus, you reject eternity. Those who truly never have the opportunity to learn about God, Jesus, and salvation? Well – I believe their options are open.

The other kind of sin, with a small s, is a failure to practice faith. It is in Romans 7 that Paul explains:

“for we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.”

In this respect we all sin because we don't always do what we know to be right. These sins however are the sins that are forgiven time and again. Failure to practice faith, to do what we know to be right, is sin indeed and must be acknowledged and confessed, however, with Jesus in our lives we know we are forgiven those sins every time no matter how large or how small. Accordingly, it is within this context that we must look at verse 23. Forgiveness of sins in this context, is not about the act of penance in relation to individual lapses or deeds, but about

how the communities respond to Jesus. Forgiveness of sins is the community's Spirit empowered mission to continue Jesus' work of making God known to the world.

Only God can forgive sins – Jesus is God and has the power to forgive sins. Jesus forgives all sins, so if we have genuine faith, the kind of faith that like Thomas, acknowledges Jesus as Our Lord and Our God, our sins – all of our sins – are forgiven and someone can't come by and unforgive one sin or another. This kind of sin, confessed and cleansed by Jesus' blood, cannot keep us from eternity – only the sin of rejecting God as revealed by Jesus will do that.

This verse, verse 23, also reminds us of the prayer we say weekly. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"

For that reason, as we go out into the world, spreading the good news and helping new believers in their walk; we are also helping them defeat sin, in essence helping them to receive forgiveness from sin by coming into a faith relationship with Christ. Without that relationship we are sinners – pure and simple.

This is the second week of Easter, one week ago we celebrated our risen savior whose purpose it was to bring us closer to God, because only through Jesus could we know God. Now he lives and we are able to live sin-free, because we believe.

Jesus said to Thomas, do not doubt but believe, and it is our job now to remove the doubt that causes sin – replace it with faith and go out helping others to believe as well.