

Thomas saw the risen Christ with his own eyes and then he said, “My Lord and my God.” But Jesus replied, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Why is that? Why is it more blessed to believe without seeing?

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Envisioning was not Doubting Thomas’ best quality. He was a realist. He believed in what he saw with his eyes, and what could be proved with empirical evidence. He had a rough time with metaphors and symbols. So, when Jesus spoke in parables, it drove Thomas nuts. He must have said something like, “What’s with all these stories? Why can’t Jesus just say what he means?” At the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you... and you know the way where I am going.” We can imagine most of the clueless disciples trying to look thoughtful, and nodding, “Yes, yes.” But not Thomas who said, “Jesus we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

The next day the way Jesus was going became painfully clear. Thomas knew that his Lord’s hands were nailed to a cross, and his side was split with a spear. He knew the man he had been following for the last three years was dead. So, when Thomas hears from the other disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead it is only natural for him to say, “What are you talking about? Oh, I get it. This is another metaphor. You mean in some symbolic way Jesus is still with us, or that hope has risen from our losses. Well, that’s not good enough for me.” To use the words from the text, he said, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

“I do not believe.” Over the years, as a pastor, I’ve heard those words a lot. “I do not believe I will ever be in love again. Not after all the hurt from the last relationship.” “I do not believe I will ever be healthy. Not after what the doctor told me.” “I do not believe peace will ever come to Israel, Gaza, and Ukraine.” “I do not believe the church’s local missions will ever make a real difference in the city.” “I do not believe.” The very construction of the sentence makes it clear that unbelief is a choice, just as is belief.

The luxury of being a non-believer is that you don’t have to worry about caring for the poor, pursuing justice, responding to a climate in crisis, or even praying, “Thy kingdom come” on Sunday mornings. And if you don’t believe change is possible in your own life, then you don’t have to worry about spirituality, or exercise, or trying again in a new relationship or another job. You can just give up on the world and yourself, wrap your days in comfortable despair, and not bother with things like dreams and visions.

Doubt is easy. Believing means you have a lot of work to do, which is why the church has a mission. As Thomas would remind us, however, belief must have its reasons. It needs to be more than wishful thinking.

Here is the church’s reason for believing, and thus, working for a better tomorrow: Jesus Christ really is risen from the dead. On Easter we were not celebrating the perseverance of the human spirit or Christ’s teachings that live on after he died. That wasn’t good enough for Thomas and it isn’t good enough for me. If that is all Easter was about, we should all join Pilate in washing our hands of the whole thing. Easter is not a metaphor. Thomas was right to have his doubts about that.

All four of the gospel writers claim that Jesus physically, literally, really, rose from the dead. If you were there when he appeared in the Upper Room, you too could put your finger in the nail marks on his hands and your hand in the wound in his side. That is central to the Christian belief in hope. In the words of the Apostle Paul, if Christ was not risen from the dead, then everything else we believe and do is in vain and we should close the doors of the church because we have nothing to say to the world.

Our only reason for having hope and continuing to work for tomorrow is that our Savior is alive! He has ascended to the right hand of his Father and through the Holy Spirit he is continuing to his work of salvation. The risen Jesus Christ is not done with his work in the nations of the world, and he is not done with his good work in your life. If you believe that, then you have every reason to keep working as well.

In his book, *The Call of Service*, the Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles, tells the stories of some Black six-year-old children in New Orleans in 1961. These children were under a court order to participate in the desegregation of public schools. Every day as they went to school they were taunted and called terrible names. It took the National Guard just to get them inside the doors of their school. A little girl by the name of Tessie had about had her fill of this mission. One morning she told her grandmother she was feeling sick and wanted to stay home from school. Her believing grandmother responded,

“It’s no picnic child—I know that Tessie... Lord Almighty, if I could just go with you and call those people to my side, and read to them from the Bible, and remind them that he’s up there, Jesus, watching over all of us. Lord, I pray for them, those poor, poor folks who are out there shouting their heads off at you. You’re one of the Lord’s people; he’s put his hand on you. He’s given a call to you, a call to serve in his name.”

Tessie decided that maybe she was feeling well enough to go to school after all.

The Lord’s hands are on you too. They still bear the marks of the nail prints from the cross, where he was dying to love you. Until you see that, you’ll never feel well enough to continue the work of hope. So, then the question is how do we see that? We weren’t in the Upper Room with Thomas. All we have are stories about the resurrection. We have no proof. Right. We can see only by faith.

Faith is not an explanation that leads to a certainty, and no amount of evidence can give it to you. Neither is faith a matter of the heart or emotions. It isn’t something you necessarily feel. Faith is a choice. It arises amid your doubts. It takes doubt seriously and presses it honestly until you come to doubt your doubts. So, in the end, faith is an act of the will—a choice to believe. And that makes faith more powerful than certainty.

We do not have certainty or proof about the things that really matter the most to us. In the words of Frederick Buechner, “Can you prove that life is better than death or that love is better than hate? Can you prove the greatness of the great or the beauty of the beautiful? Can you prove the friendship of your friend? When you experience it, you don’t need to prove it. When you don’t experience it, no proof will do.” Have you ever tried to prove that you love someone? The futility of it will drive you crazy, and it only does damage to the relationship that requires belief.

In my line of work I get to do a lot of weddings. My favorite part is always the vows, which of course is at the core of the service as well as the new marriage. And as the officiating pastor I have a great view of the couple as they create this sacred covenant. The part that gets me every time is not that someone is vowing to always being the loving and faithful, but when I look at the eyes of the person who is hearing this, I can see they believe in this vow. Remarkable! They have chosen to believe someone will always give them grace with absolutely no proof. And in all the ordinary days that follow that extraordinary day of their wedding if they do all they can to continue to nurture faith in the vows, the marriage will remain strong.

Some things, like love and hope, only come alive by faith. That is exactly why Jesus told Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Not seeing with the eye, allows you to see with faith. And as with any important relationship, only faith allows you to enjoy the love of God at work in your life.

If you believe it, you will see it. And if you have seen the work of the risen Christ in your life, then you can join Tessie and every other ordinary saint who has gone before us in casting off fear and despair and getting on with the hard work of the hopeful. Amen.