

**“But These Are Written ...”**

*“... but 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” John 20:31.*

As some of you know, Emmanuel uses a lectionary, a reading schedule, to determine each weekend’s readings. The specific lectionary, reading schedule, Emmanuel uses has a three-year cycle. One of the goals of this schedule is to regularly place before the congregation a large portion of the Bible. Now each cycle shares a little different variety of the Bible, but there are times when these cycles overlap or match up. This weekend, is one of those times. In all three cycles of this reading schedule, the weekend after Easter has the same Gospel reading, John 20:19-31.

This overlap should suggest to us that this account in the Bible is very significant and it is! There’s so much packed into this section of Scripture. For example, John 20:19-31 describes Jesus’ first appearance to His disciples the evening of the day that He rose from the grave. This account also reveals the gift of forgiveness, Jesus won and now gives to His disciples, to the Church, to be delivered throughout the world. Most memorably, this passage contains the words and actions of the disciple, Thomas, who missed Jesus’ first appearance, and because of his reaction is often labeled as Doubting Thomas. A text like this can be a pastor’s dream with so much to highlight and a listener’s nightmare as the pastor has seemingly endless material in order to give his hearers more than they bargained for – multiple sermons in one!

While I can’t promise that you won’t get more than you bargained for today, I can promise you that the main angle that we’ll view this prominent text with is this, what is needed for faith. What we discover in this passage, is that like Thomas, we all have certain things we feel we must have in order to believe, but the conclusion to this reading actually points us to what God really needs to create and sustain faith in us. Our reading reveals a struggle that we regularly find ourselves and others in, taking the work of faith into our own hands, where we think we decide what it will take for us to believe, instead of seeing the work of faith in God’s hands and receiving what He needs to lead us to believe.

**“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25).** These are the bold words Thomas stated after the other disciples told him that they had seen Jesus. Perhaps out of fear, maybe out of doubt, possibly out of stubbornness born from regret and disappointment at what he had missed, Thomas wouldn’t be convinced by his friends’ words. He felt that he needed more. According to his own words, he needed to experience the risen Jesus and the crucifixion marks that He still bore himself. Thomas needed to see and touch to believe and I don’t think any of us could blame him.

Yes, while Thomas’ statement has seemed to forever mark him as, Doubting Thomas, his words are quite relatable. Throughout the seasons of our own faith walks, and maybe even now during this current season, Thomas’ words give voice to the same struggle of faith we experience. We feel we need more in order to believe. Maybe it’s more answers. We want to understand how things work – those mysteries that the Bible only describes but never completely explains. We want to know why things have gone a certain way in our lives. Perhaps we desire specific experiences. We want to see clear and consistent improvement because of Christianity in our life and in the world around us. We want to feel divine, powerful, moving moments that cover us with goosebumps because we think those feelings make God’s presence undeniable to us. Like Thomas, we have had and will have moments where we feel we need more in order to believe.

It’s not in our nature to listen, trust and believe. Satan sowed this seed of doubt into Adam and Eve’s hearts and minds and generation after generation has passed this struggle down in various forms. Mind you, this isn’t an excuse for this problem, simply the origin. Each of us bears the weight of this

broken trust with our own sinful deeds. It's not that God has ever been untrustworthy, rather it's that we are so easily distrusting. We put up our guard and defenses only to drive away the One who is our guard and defense with such eternal stakes at play. Attempting to protect ourselves from more and more damage from sin, we shut out the One who truly brings peace, forgiveness and healing from sin's eternal destruction.

While it's not our nature to listen, trust and believe, it's not God's desire that we remain isolated in our doubts. This is the real beauty of this account with Thomas. It's not that Thomas got his way with God, but rather that God was merciful and gracious enough to provide Thomas with what he thought he needed to believe. Even after the resurrection, we witness Jesus' care, compassion and understanding with a broken human being. Dying and rising didn't lessen Jesus' loving concern and patience for troubled Thomas. No, He wanted to show Thomas that while He could create and sustain faith with the very means Thomas sought, He didn't have to do it this way. Jesus' response to Thomas' cry of faith makes this clear, **“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed”** (*John 20:29*) You see, Jesus is the author of faith not Thomas and as the author of faith He needs far less than what Thomas thought was needed in order to have faith.

This reality is something that you and I have to be reminded of regularly too. Yes, God can and may graciously grant us answers that give us the how's and why's we've been searching for. Yes, God can and may provide us with experiences that allow us to see improvement in our lives and the world around us because of Christianity or convince us without a doubt that we've felt God's presence. If and when those times come, praise the Lord! I pray those gifts from the Lord are always a boost to our faith. But those times aren't the bedrock of our faith. Yes, they maybe the more memorable moments of our faith walk, but they aren't the foundation. The bedrock and foundation of our faith is what God truly needs to create and sustain our faith, not what the disciple Thomas or we ourselves think we need in order to believe.

In last verse of our reading, our God makes it clear what He needs in order to create and sustain our faith. **“... but 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”** (*John 20:31*). Since God is the author of faith, our faith, and not us, He needs far less to create and sustain faith than we think is needed. His needs His Word for His Word delivers and produces exactly what it proclaims. His Word declares to us the forgiveness and peace won by the wounds forever written into our Savior's hands and side. His Word packaged in the Bible, Baptism, Communion and in the mouths of pastors and other Christians can and does accomplish the purpose for which He sends it, and yes, that includes the purpose of creating and sustaining our faith. For faith comes by hearing and hearing from the Word of Christ.

This Easter reality of what God needs to create and sustain faith is so encouraging. For when the answers that we're seeking don't come and maybe never come, when those experiences don't happen and perhaps never happen, we aren't left to drown in our doubts. No, because of God's Word we have an anchor in the midst of the fiercest doubts. We have assurance that our God can accomplish vastly more for our faith with far less than we expect to need for our faith. We have hope that even the briefest and shortest encounters with God's Word can by His power and grace, create, grow and sustain faith in Him. And by His mercy and compassion, we can confidently count ourselves and others among those blessed who have not seen and yet have believed. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan