

“The proof is in the pudding.” Have you ever heard someone use that old axiom? The saying is actually an edit of an older saying from the 1600s: “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.” It didn’t refer to our pudding desserts but to savory dishes cooked in bags. Diners wouldn’t know if the food was properly cooked until they tried eating it. When we use it, we mean that we want to see and experience something *for ourselves* rather than only trust the words of someone else. Thomas applied this test to Jesus’s resurrected body, but what if we turned it around and applied it to our own faith? Our faith is proven by what we believe and trust—sometimes in spite of circumstances.

The Sunday after Easter brings us to this gospel drama where Thomas is cast in a leading role. The disciples have heard from the women that Jesus has risen from the dead, but they are so afraid that they’ve locked themselves up tight, worried that their lives are in danger by those who put Jesus to death. Fear outweighs the witness of the women. Some scholars focus on Jesus’s physical movements and his words of peace which transforms their fear. That sounds like a good follow up to the theme of our Lenten sermons: Freedom from Fear. But today I’d like to add some thought regarding Jesus’ words about the relationship of believing to what we see for ourselves. In John’s gospel, the idea of witnessing plays a significant role to the challenges and charges brought against Jesus throughout his ministry. People want to see “signs” (i.e. miracles) for themselves if they are to believe, and witnesses are brought against Jesus to testify to what he said and did. At every turn Jesus rejects the demand for signs and laments those who ask for them as lacking faith.

The disciples’ response to the women’s witness to the resurrection, then, is identical to the crowds. Even those closest to Jesus, those who heard what would happen from Jesus himself—and who even saw partial proof (John and Peter went into the empty tomb)—struggle to believe what they *have not seen for themselves*. This is because they are afraid. Their fear closed them down, literally locked them up in a room—hiding. So, Jesus makes his way into the

midst of their fear, showing them his scarred body. By doing so, Jesus is graciously stooping down to meet them in their weakness and paralyzing fear. And his words of peace are matched by proof of his conquering what they most fear: Death. His body is scarred. But he is not dead. He is alive! Perhaps more alive now than ever. He made his way unseen into a locked room after all. It's not just mourning that God turns into dancing. God transforms our paralyzing fear into rejoicing. And once free from fear, Jesus commissions them with his calling and with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus specifically speaks to them about forgiveness here. When I think about the context—of how the disciples' fear of those who put Jesus to death has taken over their lives—I think that Jesus was being very intentional. Only by witnessing the resurrected Jesus for themselves are they freed from fear, which means, those who killed Jesus did not actually *succeed*. Freed from their fear, they are now free to forgive so that they will be free to fulfill Jesus's call. Rejoicing is very difficult when harboring grudges, bitterness, and a hardened heart. The power of freedom from fear is God's Easter power.

Thomas' doubt, then, seems par for the course. He reacts the same way the others did: He needs to see for himself—no one else's witness, the word of a mere man or woman, will be enough for him. Thomas doesn't seem to have had the same fear as the other disciples though, since he wasn't locked up in the room with them the week before. I wonder if his struggle isn't more related to his bitter disappointment and deep sadness.

The disciple Thomas features more prominently in the Gospel of John than he does in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. It is Thomas who believes Jesus is worthy of following *unto death* (in 11:16) and Thomas is the one who interrupts Jesus because he wants to know how to *go with Jesus to heaven* (in 14:5). Maybe what Thomas was struggling with was his own disappointment about not following through with his commitments to Jesus. If that is so, it's fitting then that Thomas is the one who makes the only explicit confession of Jesus' divinity when in verse 28 he says: "*My Lord and my God!*"

Notice too that the disciples are no longer *so* afraid that the doors are *locked*. This time they are just *shut*. Jesus, again, comes into the midst of their struggle with overflowing patience and grace, allowing Thomas to *see* and *touch* his scars so that he chooses for himself to believe.

I say *choose to believe* intentionally because verse 27 of the the NIV translates it: “*Stop doubting and believe.*” The literal translation, however, would be “*Do not be unbelieving, but be believing.*” Jesus has given Thomas more than he needs to believe now. And boy oh boy, does Thomas believe! In the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* entry for Thomas, John D. Turner notes that Thomas’ explicit confession of Jesus as God is the *only one made* in the fourth gospel. Grace and power met Thomas face to face and turned his struggle into a reason to praise.

But God already gave Thomas and the others multiple graces so they would believe. It just so happened those graces were given to or happened to other people. Or they were recounted to them by witnesses. This is what Jesus sees in them: Their fear and whatever else was getting in their way of *believing* the resurrection message that the women gave them is just like the things keeping so many others from *believing* the truth about Jesus. It wasn’t on their terms. “*Blessed,*” Jesus says, “*are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*”

The disciples will have to rely on this “blessing” as they fulfill Jesus’ call as apostles. They will be people who tell and witness to others about what they have seen in the hopes that the Holy Spirit will use their words to bring faith and belief to those who have not seen or experienced these things for themselves. It’s almost a strange irony, don’t you think? The disciples will see people believe in ways they themselves could not.

As the gospel writer closes this chapter, he says that these things, among the many that could have been included, were written that we too “*may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God*” for the purpose of “*life in his name.*” We have not seen or touched Jesus’ uniquely resurrected body and will not do so until we join him in God’s kingdom. Which is *not* to say that we

do not experience the resurrected Jesus and the Holy Spirit's Easter power here and now. We do have personal experience that helps us *believe* and the fact that we believe in Jesus' *spiritual presence* through his Spirit in the midst of our fears, struggles, and disbelieving means that we've already learned an important aspect of God's design for his family of faith. We listen to each other's stories to be encouraged in the faith. We celebrate the ways God shows up for each of us and let God's ways of showing up lay a foundation of trust that God is with us. Those with *this kind of believing*, Jesus says, are blessed, knowing a deeper, richer, faith and life with God.

When I was a kid, I remember hearing the end of John chapter 20 in a Sunday School class one morning. After my teacher Mrs. Muffly read the part about Jesus telling Thomas that there would be lots of people who would not see him but who would still believe in him anyway, she commented, "Jesus means us. We've never seen him the way the disciples did, but he is our Savior, and we believe in him. Jesus is talking about us." I can still remember turning that thought over in my mind: "Am I in the Bible? **I am** in the Bible! **Cool!**"

A few years later I ran across that same passage as a Junior in high school and I realized that my Sunday school teacher might have taken hermeneutical liberties with John 20. No, I am not named in the Bible, at least not specifically or personally. But when John turns to his readers in verses 30 & 31 of chapter 20, he says, "*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" That is unquestionably a direct and living address to me as the reader.

Maybe all of us *are*, maybe each of us *is*, really in the Bible after all. I am in the Bible; you are in the Bible. This is my story; this is your story. "**Cool!**" Amen.