

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

April 24, 2022 – SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Believing without Seeing*”\*

Acts 5:27-32 (The Apostles are forbidden to teach about Jesus)  
Psalm 150 (Praise the Lord with everything that has breath)  
Revelation 1:4-8 (John witnesses to Jesus as firstborn from the dead)  
St. John 20:19-31 (Thomas meets the risen Christ—and believes!)

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Our Gospel lesson for today begins not at the empty tomb, but with the pitiful scene of Jesus’ disciples huddled together in fear, inside a small dark house, on Easter evening. After the gruesome death of their Master, they had locked every window and door, and were in a state of mourning. Surely, the women were weeping, and all of Christ’s followers must have been deeply depressed, angry, disillusioned, confused, and to say the least, terrified—of both their fellow Jews and the Romans.

Likely, they were so horrified at what had happened to their beloved teacher, all they could think of was the possibility that they, too, would have to undergo the same torment, pain, and death as He had. When the news reached them that Jesus was alive, they doubted it could be true. After all, they had seen His body severely beaten and bleeding, mutilated, pierced with spikes, crowned with thorns, and the spear thrust in His side. No corpse could rise from that kind of torture and death!

Because Our Lord knew intimately their doubts and fear, St. John (20:19-21) tells us that “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week ... [the risen] Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” Then, after He had shown them His pierced hands and side, “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you.’” Lovingly, Christ offered these men and women incontrovertible evidence to rid them of their doubts, and His incomparable peace to calm their dread.

Next, does Jesus sit down, ask for food and drink, and start to enjoy a much-needed social reunion with His friends? No! Our Lord goes straight to commissioning His disciples with the Great Apostolic Mission to the World: “‘As [God] the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven’ (vv. 22-23). What an amazing gift was granted to them on that day: The Holy Spirit to guide them; the power to forgive sins; and an Apostolic authority that has been passed directly to every priest from generation to generation.

So, where was Thomas, the missing disciple, at such a momentous moment? Unfortunately the Bible doesn’t tell us. Perhaps his grief was so immense, he preferred to be alone. In any case, when Thomas finally does show up, his companions cry out, “We have seen the Lord!” But, just as his fellow disciples had been fearful, skeptical, and mourning before they encountered the Risen Christ, Thomas is not so easily convinced either. He tells the group (v. 25): “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Before we misjudge Thomas, we should be aware that, just possibly, he remembered the words of His Master Jesus, who once proclaimed (Matthew 24:23-25), “If any one says to you, ‘Lo, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Lo, I have told you beforehand.” Because of Jesus’ stern warning, Thomas, out of faithfulness to his Lord, may not have wanted to believe until he had substantial proof that this was the true Christ.

One week later—just like us being in church, the Sunday after Easter Day—Jesus appeared to the disciples again, as suddenly as He had, immediately after the Resurrection. This time, St. Thomas *is* present. Although the doors to the house are still tightly barred and there is no possibility of physical entry, Jesus materializes from nowhere and stands among them.

Thomas probably thought he was seeing a ghost! After all, there was another time when the disciples had seen Jesus walking toward them on a stormy lake and they thought they were seeing an apparition.

But once again, Jesus speaks those same words of love and grace to Thomas: “Peace be with you.” Then, because He understands Thomas’ need for certainty, Jesus invites him: “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side.” No ghost would make that kind of an offer. Rather than reaching out, Thomas responds with firm assurance and conviction, “My Lord and my God!”

Passed down for centuries, the tradition of Holy Mother Church tells us that St. Thomas did not actually touch our Lord, nor did he ever contemplate doing so after seeing the risen Christ. Very quickly, he realized it is not our human senses which perceive Truth. Rather, it is the discernment of our minds joined to the movement of our hearts, which, both working together, produce faith.

And, in order to show that our hearts’ faith is greater than what we can see with our eyes, or touch with our hands, Jesus tells Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (v. 29).

So dear friends, we are the ones who are truly blessed if we believe in the Risen Christ although we have not seen Him with our eyes. This blessing of faith without sight has continued for 2,000 years, as every Easter, around the world, Christians proclaim with confidence: “Christ is Risen!” and reply with equal assurance, “He is Risen indeed!” Praise God, we have not seen, and yet we believe!

The skepticism of the Apostles and especially that of St. Thomas does not tarnish our Christian heritage. Rather, it is beneficial, if not vital, to all of Christianity. That’s because reasonable caution, sound discernment, and good judgment, are critical in spiritual matters—and the Resurrection of our Lord is no exception. For this reason, the Apostles had to be sure that Jesus rose from the dead in order to proclaim the truth without doubt, so that we may believe, as St. John writes: “that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing [we] may have life in his name.” How blessed we are, to have a faith that comes from our hearts and souls, and not purely from our human senses or cognitive reasoning.

In the secular world, St. Thomas is popularly known as “Doubting Thomas.” But in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, he is called “Believing Thomas.” Byzantine icons frequently depict St. Thomas holding a scroll that reads, “My Lord and my God”—Thomas’ powerful, faith-filled declaration of Christ’s sovereignty and divinity.<sup>1</sup>

May God also give us the grace to, along with St. Thomas, boldly declare in our thoughts, words, and deeds, that Jesus is both Lord and God—and to live our lives in accordance with this faith. *Amen.*

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\* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “*Skepticism can be a good thing in spiritual matters.*” 27 April 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Kosmas Damianides, “Sermon for Thomas Sunday,” *Orthodox Christian Info.*, 2 April 2010 <[http://www.orthodoxchristian.info/pages/Thomas\\_Sun.htm](http://www.orthodoxchristian.info/pages/Thomas_Sun.htm)> 26 April 2014. Used with permission.