

THE FAITHFUL SKEPTIC

John 20:19-31

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First Christian Church

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19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.' ²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Every fall when future reporters showed up in Skip Leabo's Intro to Journalism class at A&M, his first priority was teaching them to be astute consumers of news. Don't believe it just because it's on the front page of the morning paper or the lead story at six o'clock. Who prepared this story? How many sources did they consult? Is there a fact checker in the newsroom and an editor who sets high standards for reporters?

Arm yourself with healthy skepticism, Dr. Leabo would say. Make those reporters work for your trust. Pay attention to credentials and experience. If you're

listening to an investigative piece on City Hall that was prepared by the weekend sports guy, better beware.

I think the apostle in the scripture spotlight this morning could have been a cracker jack reporter. Without question Thomas was smart and brave and fully committed. In today's passage he demonstrates a healthy skepticism for what he is hearing from some shell-shocked disciples who have gone into hiding following the execution of their leader. Every knock at the door, every sound in the night could be the Roman guard or some neighborhood bounty hunter hoping to provide information that leads to the arrest of those followers of King of the Jews.

The disciples haven't slept in days, they've had limited contact with their families, when darkness falls Thomas leaves for a short while, possibly to go for food and he returns to what must be some kind of group hysteria. Because every one of them to a man claims he has seen and talked to Jesus, who is most certainly alive and very recently in the neighborhood.

Thomas, the investigative reporter, is having none of it. He works the room, questioning each man, studying his face. The details of the personal accounts are consistent, the joy on their faces can't be easily explained as the result of sleep deprivation or hunger. Thomas trusts these men, they are brothers, he knows their hearts. But these are stressful, dangerous times and his friends are simply delusional. Nothing that can't be cured by a good meal and a long nap. They'll be right as rain before you know it.

For Thomas, seeing is believing. That's probably true for most of us here today. The apostle Paul disagrees. You remember that Paul spent the first three days as a follower of Christ not seeing anything. Later he taught a lot about believing in what we cannot see.

II Corinthians 4...

¹⁸“*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*”

That’s profound...but problematic. I don’t know about you, but I’ve spent most of my life trying my best to believe in things I cannot see. There have been mountain top experiences when all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. And there have been times when I stand with Thomas and wish for proof.

Psychologist and Presbyterian preacher John Ortberg has written a book all about the human struggle to believe in the face of doubt. He titled it “Know Doubt.”

Ortberg says each of us can divide what we believe into three categories. Category #1—our Public Convictions. It’s what we say we believe when others are listening. It’s the political comment you post on your Facebook page or the opinion you express at a dinner party.

Here’s what Ortberg writes:

Public convictions are what I want other people to think I believe, even though I really may not believe them. For example, if my wife Nancy asks me, “Does this dress make my hips look too large?” the correct response is, “No. I didn’t even know you had hips until you mentioned them.” There’s a public relations value to voicing our public convictions.

A presidential election year is a great time to study public convictions. Consultants make big money helping candidates express their convictions in a way that builds their voter base. And when a public conviction meets with disapproval, consultants help the candidate retract and revise their stand.

But it's not just a modern problem. Rewind 2,000 years and we can find King Herod stating a public conviction we know he didn't believe. Do you remember what he said to the wise men? "*Go and make a careful search for the child. When you find him, bring me a report so that I too may go and worship him.*" (Matthew 2:8)

Category one—public convictions--what we *say* we believe.

Category two: Private Convictions. This is what we *think* we believe. They can seem very real to us...right up until we put them to the test. Peter gives us a stellar example of a private conviction that fails on the night Jesus is arrested. Mark 14...

²⁶ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ²⁷ And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written,

*'I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep will be scattered.'*

²⁸ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." [Here's where Peter states his private conviction.] ²⁹ Peter said to him, "Even though all become deserters, I will not."³⁰ Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." ³¹ But Peter said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you."

Did Peter truly believe what he was saying? You bet he did. We can believe something with every fiber of our being until we're tested. When the going gets tough...well, you know the rest.

Do you remember Burt Lancaster in the starring role of Elmer Gantry. He was a great revival preacher in the time of tent revivals and what was known as the sawdust trail. At the pulpit, no one could compare with Elmer Gantry's passion and

eloquence. When he was off duty, he was a shady character indeed. Now enter the reporter who wants to write the definitive article on this man of God. The reporter takes the time to observe his subject in and out of the spotlight and can't reconcile the man at the bar with the man holding a tentful of believers in the palm of his hand. The reporter asks Gantry, "Do you really believe what you say in your sermons?" Gantry answered, "When I'm preaching, I do."

Category 2—private convictions—what we truly think we believe.

Category 3—core convictions—this is what we truly believe, as demonstrated by what we do. Paul was a genius at describing the tug-of-war between what we say and what we do. (Romans 7: 15, 18-19)

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I know that nothing good dwells within me. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Wow! Can you imagine anyone on the campaign trail this year displaying that kind of honesty? This morning we have the apostle Paul admitting that there's a gap between what he says he believes and what he does and we have Thomas admitting that he'll believe in the risen Christ only when he can see the risen Christ.

There's something refreshing about that kind of honesty. It takes great courage as people of faith to express our doubts. Sometimes the church frowns on that level of disclosure. We are uncomfortable with that kind of truth-telling.

On Friday I heard the most honest personal testimony I have ever heard in a church service. It was part of the memorial service for Marion Hodgson, the mother of Marjorie Parker. The honesty came from Marion, who wrote about her

conversion experience years ago and asked that it be shared at her funeral. Listen to these words...

“I believed that Jesus lived and was a good man, but in order to join my husband’s church, I had to believe also that Jesus was born of a virgin, was the son of God, was part of a mysterious Trinity, performed miracles and rose from the dead. How could I say I believe those things when I didn’t? How could anyone be sure when there was no proof?”

Marion goes on to say that honesty was very important to her, but so was her desire to raise her children in the church. She asked for a private baptism because she felt silly. The pastor asked some faith questions about being born again through baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Here are Marion’s honest words again:

“In my heart I apologized to God, for I didn’t believe a single stilted word of it. God would take me home to Him when I died, no matter what. I knew it. So I felt like a liar in church, saying these ridiculous things. I prayed silently for forgiveness.”

But as the minister prayed over Marion, something changed inside her. Here’s how she describes it:

“I was filled with an electric surge of energy that pulsed through my bloodstream. And in that remarkable instant I knew it was all true, the whole fantastic, unbelievable, wonderful miraculous truth.”

At this point Marion looks around because she is convinced that what is happening to her on the inside must be visible to the minister and her family. Apparently not. And it took Marion several days to be able to put the experience into words and tell her husband and her minister about her change of heart.

Those words reached out Friday to every person attending her memorial service. And here's how she closed. "Dearly beloved," she wrote, "let me speak plainly about Jesus. It's all there in the New Testament, and it's all true. Don't wait as long as I did to read it, you who are doubters as I was. If you have no faith in Jesus personally, then believe in the things he has done, the lives he has changed. And ask him to change yours, even if you can't sense him there yet, listening to you, loving you. Just ask."

Listening to Marion's honest confession of doubt made the story of her conversion all the sweeter. And what about our friend Thomas?

What became of the apostle for whom seeing was believing? Many records outside of scripture give us clues regarding the life of Thomas. After Pentecost, as the early church began to send its first missionaries to distant lands, Thomas was sent to preach the good news to the Parthians, Medes and Persians. In 52 AD he sailed to India where he found a Jewish community along the Malabar coast. For a year he traveled in the company of a Jewish merchant, preaching to all classes of people, and planting at least 7 churches. In accordance with apostolic custom, Thomas ordained teachers and leaders or elders. Altogether 17,000 conversions were recorded. In this same area of India today there is a large native population calling themselves "Christians of St. Thomas." Ancient hymns and contemporary historians of ancient India provide further proof that the *life* of Thomas testified to the *faith* of Thomas, who was a devoted follower of the risen Christ.