

SEEING AND BELIEVING

John 20:19-31 Jesus Appears to His Disciples

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” ²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” ²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” ³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ 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.

MESSAGE:

“Doubting Thomas” had a scientific mind. He insisted on concrete evidence before he would accept the truth of anything—especially a report that a dead person had come back to life. I call that a scientific mind because what Thomas was demanding was what any scientist would demand: it’s called empirical proof—solid evidence. Empirical evidence or data is the foundation of what is called the “scientific method.” By focusing on what can be observed, measured and verified under controlled conditions, scientists have expanded our knowledge of the universe and that knowledge has given birth to innovations in areas like communication, transportation, medicine and information technology that stagger the imagination. So from a worldly perspective, there is absolutely nothing wrong with Thomas’ response to the report that Jesus had risen from the dead. “*Show me the proof,*” he said.

Luther once said that all believers share one basic sin and that sin was doubt in the inmost heart. It was the sin of the man who asked Jesus to cure his demon-possessed son. Jesus said to the man, “*Everything is possible for him who believes.*” The man responded,

"I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23-24) Doubt or unbelief is a worm that gnaws at the faith of every believer in his pilgrimage through this world.

It's the part of us—the "doubting Thomas" part—that sometimes yearns for the same kind of proof that Thomas demanded. Have you ever thought how nice it would be to have just a little concrete evidence that Jesus is who He said He was? Maybe a personal appearance and consultation? *"How am I doing, Jesus? Got any suggestions? How about a little miracle? Walk across my swimming pool or change a bottle of water into wine? Boy, if you did that, I wouldn't ever again have any doubts that you were the Son of God!"* In other words, *"Prove to me Jesus that You are what they say you are."* If we could only see that, we think, we would REALLY believe that He was our living Lord and Savior because he would have proven Himself to our satisfaction.

Way down deep we're all Doubting Thomases. And that's why Jesus' words seem mysterious to us when He says, *"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet who have believed."* (John 20:29) What an odd thing to say! How can it be more of a blessing to believe in that which we have not seen than to believe in that which we have seen? It goes against all our natural instincts. Even worse, it goes against the scientific method—and we can't have that, can we?

Clearly what Jesus is referring to is faith—belief in something we can't see. And he is saying that faith delivers a greater blessing to us than empirical knowledge. And let's face it: that's a little hard to swallow. It's also why there are a lot of Christians who are of the opinion that the claims of the Bible are only valid insofar as they don't conflict with the claims of science. I once had a member of my former church say to me, *"When the Bible collides with science, science always wins."* That man—and others like him—are twins of Doubting Thomas because they look to a superior court (the court of human reason) to validate the claims of Scripture. According to our Savior, they miss a great blessing when they do so.

Does the Bible take up this theme anywhere else? Well it just so happens that it does—right here in our Old Testament lesson for today. Isn't that convenient! [Genesis 13:1-17 appears on page 4] So here's what's going on in *Genesis 13*. Having obeyed God's instructions, Abram and his nephew Lot, along with their two clans, have migrated to the land of Canaan, where they seek to settle down and raise their flocks. The land they ended up in is the south of modern day Israel—an area called the Negev. Now this is pretty barren country which couldn't support both Abram's flocks and Lot's flocks and it resulted in quarrels springing up between the servants of the two men over grazing rights. So Abram and Lot agreed to separate and Abram did an almost unthinkable thing: he gave his nephew Lot his choice of land to live in and said he would take whatever was left. Now to the east, there was a beautiful verdant plain with lush pastures around the Jordan River. So guess which land Lot chose? We are told that he "looked up" and saw that the country around the river was like a garden of Eden, so he chose it and Abram was left with the Negev. Lot simply added common sense to his powers of observation and made the obvious choice—the reasonable choice. Abram entrusted himself and his

family to God and took what was left. As the saying goes, Lot walked by sight and Abram walked by faith. And Abram became the father of a great nation while Lot ended up on the outskirts of Sodom—probably the most wicked city in the history of the world, and had to be rescued by Abram. Paul refers to Abram as a model for all who live by faith when he wrote, *“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”* (Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:6)

So what is to be learned from all this? Well, first and foremost, we must always remember to keep our faith and hope pinned to the Creator and not to His creation. We must clearly distinguish between the Giver and the gift. Between the Doer of the miracle and the miracle itself. Satan is constantly trying to tempt us into placing our confidence in things of this world rather than the One who made this world. In the vicissitudes of the stock market rather than the One who giveth and taketh away. In Mammon, the god of unrighteousness, rather than in Yahweh, the God of righteousness. And we cannot serve both God and mammon.

Placing our hopes and our confidence in things of this world is a fatal yet common mistake many of us make. It is anticipated in the words of Moses in the fourth chapter of Deuteronomy where he warns the Israelites of the temptations they will face when they have entered their new homeland: the promised land of Israel:

“Watch yourselves very carefully, so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or a woman or like any animal on earth or any bird that flies in the air...and when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars—all the heavenly array—do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the Lord your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven.

We live in this world. We see, eat, breathe, smell, touch, work and sleep in this world. But our religion does not come from this world—and it’s hard for us to remember that. We are connected to this world through our senses and our power of reason. But we are connected to our God, the Creator and Redeemer of this world, not by our senses or power of reason, but by faith—faith which is created in us by the Holy Spirit of God working through the Word of God. To try to understand articles of faith through our power of reason and our senses is like a gnat trying to comprehend the contents of the Encyclopedia Britannica. To try to limit the wisdom of the Bible to what is permissible within the bounds of current scientific knowledge is like trying to fit an elephant into the stomach of an ant.

Since the beginning of civilization, philosophers like Socrates and Plato and St. Thomas Aquinas and Kant and Hegel have sought to discover God through their powers of observation and reason, and they have failed miserably, time and time again. Some, like Voltaire and Thomas Paine and Nietzsche have taken another path and tried to prove that God doesn’t exist. They too have failed miserably. God does not wish to be found—

or excluded—in those ways. Instead He seeks and finds us and gives us faith and then blesses us through the faith He has given us.

A popular expression arose several years ago that we still hear from time to time: “It’s all good.” You know, “It’s all good---man!” Well it’s not a bad way to think even if whatever they’re referring to isn’t necessarily all good. Maybe it would be better to say, “It’s all God.” Our faith does not come from our power of reason or memory or experience or sensory abilities or anything else in this world: it comes directly from God. And one day that tiny voice of Doubting Thomas that niggles at us will be stilled and we will see by sight what we now know by faith. And when that day comes, like Doubting Thomas we will say: My Lord and my God! Amen.

Genesis 13:1-17 Abram and Lot Separate

13 So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. ² Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. ³ From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier ⁴ and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD. ⁵ Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. ⁶ But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. ⁷ And quarreling arose between Abram’s herders and Lot’s. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. ⁸ So Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.” ¹⁰ Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹ So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: ¹² Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. ¹³ Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD. ¹⁴ The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶ I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”