

So wherever he was on Easter Sunday, when Thomas came back, he certainly had a lot of catching up to do. He arrived at the house where the disciples were staying to learn that, first Mary had seen Jesus in the garden near his tomb and then Jesus had appeared to the rest of them inside a locked room. His friends were filled with joy as they talked about seeing Jesus... touching his hands... hearing Jesus' voice. They went on and on about how Jesus wasn't angry with them or disappointed in their failure to save him from the cross. Instead he had blessed them. It was incredible! He gave them the gift of his spirit and then he told them they had the power to truly forgive sin.

And Thomas had missed it all.

He didn't tell his friends that they were liars or fools. He didn't ask if they had been drunk on new wine. He didn't suggest that their grief had driven them to hallucinate that Jesus had been there. But he did say, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the

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For centuries, people have told this story and talked about Thomas like he was some kind of loser. *Doubting Thomas!* It's never meant as a compliment. And it's really not fair. Our English translations of the text have done Thomas a disservice.

My friend Rick Carlson, who for many years taught Greek and New Testament at the seminary in Gettysburg, has this to say about the apostle.

"Thomas responds, not with doubt, but with definite and emphatic conditions for believing. The Greek construction of verse 25 is a clear 'if...then...' condition stated negatively. Essentially, Thomas is saying that if the conditions he establishes are not met, then he will definitely **not** believe.

Rather than *doubting Thomas*, Carlson says the text presents *conditional Thomas*.<sup>i</sup>

If we are honest with ourselves, we too have our moments of conditionality. Carlson goes on to say, "How often do we approach our faith relationship as a legal contract in which we seek to establish the terms by which we will respond with faith? *If I have historical proof...If I have a sign...If near-death experiences can verify...If God would do...If Jesus would cure...*

*Then I will believe in Christ...Then I will know that God exists...Then I will know that there is life after death...Then I will make a commitment of faith."*

If. If. If. If.

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Every time we ground our faith in what we ask from God, rather than what God freely does for us in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit, we follow in Thomas' footsteps.

Carlson's argument reminds me of King Herod's song from ***Jesus Christ Superstar***.

*So, you are the Christ, you're the great Jesus Christ!*

*Prove to me that you're divine- change my water into wine!*

*That's all you need do, and I'll know it's all true.*

*C'mon, King of the Jews!*

Prove to me that you are who you claim to be and then I'll believe!

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So what shall we make of Thomas?

In asking to see and touch Jesus, Thomas only asked for what Mary and the others had already experienced. They knew Jesus was really back. They'd had an incredible experience and Thomas only asked for the same.

And did Jesus give him what he asked for?

In verse 27, Jesus gives several commands to Thomas – look, see, touch, feel but the text never tells us that Thomas actually examines Jesus physically or inspects his wounds, as Thomas claimed he needed to do the week before.

Jesus' words command Thomas to do something, but by speaking the words, Jesus changes their relationship and Thomas no longer needs to make a serious inspection of Jesus' injuries. Instead the disciple responds with the ultimate confession of faith, "My Lord and My God!" He is the first of Jesus' followers to make this profound statement of faith.

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As Americans we remember him as *Doubting Thomas*, but for the Church of South India, he is the missionary who first brought the good news to their country. Tradition says that Thomas came to Kerala on the western shore of the southern tip of India to share the gospel with Jews who had migrated there.

Today more than twenty denominations trace their roots to the churches begun by Saint Thomas, including three Lutheran denominations. If you meet a Christian from Mumbai or Bangalore or Kerala – it is very possible that they will trace their congregation's history and even their family history back to St. Thomas who first shared the news of Easter and baptized the first Christians in southern India.

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You may not have noticed, but we read this story ever year on the first Sunday after Easter. It is the traditional story. I used to think it was because of the whole bit about, "Blessed are those who believe and haven't seen." It can make you sit up a little straighter and stand a little taller. "Take that, Thomas! I believe Jesus rode from the dead and I didn't get to see anything. So there!" But I don't think that's it.

Because we are Thomas. I'd like to have that personal interaction with the risen Lord that Mary had in the garden. Or the breakfast that Peter got to eat with Jesus by the lakeside in Gallilee. Or even what Thomas had that night - "Come, look, touch, see!" But there is something more important than all of that going on in this passage.

I have come to believe that the most significant thing that John says in our gospel today, isn't about seeing and believing. It isn't about cynicism or doubt. The most important part comes at the very end of chapter twenty, when he says, "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."

That's the good news of the resurrection. That's the good news of Easter. It's not that Jesus rose from the dead. It's that, as our Lord and our God, Jesus has given us the gift of new life.

We tell this story so that others may know that they are forgiven. And that forgiveness from God makes us difference in how we see ourselves AND other people. It's life changing. Life giving.

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During this season of Easter we will be reading portions of the First Letter of John. It is full of powerful imagery of what it is to be followers of Jesus. The author, thought by many to be the same one who wrote the gospel according to John, focuses on two themes: love and fellowship with God.

He says “if we live in the light, as God does, we share in life with each other” and that he is proclaiming these things because it will make his joy complete.”

Walking together in the light of God- being connected – sharing our selves – telling about the love of Jesus- these things John writes, will lead to his joy being full and complete.

Do you know the song, “His eye is on the Sparrow?”

*Why should I feel discouraged?*

*Why should the shadows come?*

*Why should my heart feel lonely?*

*And long for heaven and home*

*I sing because I'm happy*

*I sing because I'm free*

*His eye is on the sparrow*

*And I know he watches me*

The good news of Easter should have a solid impact on our lives. It should make an obvious difference in who we are and what we do.

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One of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor wrote,

“Each of us is faced with a choice about how we live our lives. Either we can stand around looking sad, or we can stop feeling sorry for ourselves and just listen to Jesus’ words and believe and do!

Every now and then, if you are really, really lucky, you hear something so right and true that it pierces through all your defenses and goes straight to your heart. It can make you drop to your knees. It can make you laugh until you cry, or cry until you laugh, but it is not a mental thing at all. It is a physical thing that requires a physical response. You have to do something about it; and sometimes you need help figuring out what that is.”

We should have to do something about Easter. It should compel us to action. Because we know that Jesus is Lord and God. We know that God is on our side. We are called to be people empowered by the resurrection.

We are children of the light.

We are Easter people.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

Alleluia!

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<sup>i</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=295](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=295)