

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
April 3, 2016  
Easter 2  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 5:12-29  
Psalm 118:19-24  
Revelation 1:1-8  
John 20:19-31

Theologian and author Frederick Buechner posed a question some years ago when he asked:

*Why doesn't God send us a sign to dispel all our doubts, such as a message in the sky, written by the rearrangement of the universe, with suns and moons to dot the "i's" and cross the "t's", so that the night sky would read, "I Am God! I Really Do Exist!!!"*

On perhaps a more humorous note, comedian and filmmaker Woody Allen once remarked that he might be more inclined to believe in God if God would send him a sign, preferably the sign of a large deposit in a bank account under the name "Woody Allen."

Today's Gospel lesson finds the situation quite a bit more serious, as the disciples have locked themselves behind closed doors a day or so after news first hit that Jesus has been raised from the dead. At this point, all bets are off, and nobody really knows for sure what is going on. The disciples are hunkered down and laying low, because who knows but that the ones who killed Jesus might now be looking for *them*?

The lights are low. Nerves are on edge. Adrenaline is running high. And suddenly, there stands Jesus, right in their midst. And he says to them, “Peace be with you.”

Of all the words these frightened followers needed to hear, these words from Jesus were the most important ones. Peace be with you. As the disciples see for themselves Jesus’ hands and feet, they are overcome with joy.

Of course, one of the disciples was not present in that initial encounter. Thomas did not hear Jesus’ words of peace, and he did not see Jesus in person. So when he was told about it, he remarked, “Unless I see Jesus for myself, and touch the wounds in his hands and feet, I won’t believe it.” Such a remark subsequently landed Thomas the nickname “the doubter,” and he has carried that moniker ever since.

It’s a rather unfortunate label, if you think about it. For what is the basic nature of Thomas’ complaint? Thomas’ basic complaint is simply this: “Everyone else got to see Jesus and get a good look at him, but I didn’t! I just want to see Jesus like everyone else did!”

Think about it for a moment. We read this text (as we have for centuries) and it is so easy to assume that Thomas was not present during the first encounter *because he chose not to be* -- as if a memo was delivered that said: “Jesus will

meet with his disciples at Peter's house tonight at 9:00 pm; attendance is mandatory" and Thomas didn't show up on purpose.

Did it ever occur to us that there might be many good reasons Thomas was not there, and all of them might be legitimate? The text does not tell us *why* Thomas was not there at that initial meeting. It simply tells us that he wasn't. And because he wants to see what the others saw, for two thousand years he has been labeled "the doubter." (And you thought *you* had a rough week...)

So what does Jesus do? Does he bring Thomas up short? Does he rebuke and rebuff Thomas? Sure, he says to him, "Don't be faithless any longer, but believe," but he could easily have said the same thing to the others during the first encounter.

Jesus doesn't bring Thomas up short. He grants him the same privilege he granted the others. And when Thomas sees, he believes. *My Lord, and my God!*

It can be so easy to read this text as a criticism -- a criticism of Thomas for his lack of faith. But this text is not primarily about Thomas, and it is not at all a criticism.

*This text is not a criticism of Thomas for wanting physical evidence of Jesus' resurrection. This text is a pronouncement of blessing for those (like us) who believe without it.*

This text is not a criticism -- it's a blessing! Blessed are those who have not seen me and believed anyway!

Ultimately this text is not about Thomas -- it's about us!

So let's bring this truth right into this sanctuary and into our own lives this morning. Many of you this morning may be here and you may be facing something in your lives where it would be wonderful if God would just give you a "sign." Oh, how wonderful it would be if God would just rearrange the stars and write you a message in the night sky, so that there would be no doubt what you are to do.

Wouldn't it be nice if God would drop you a card in the mail, or do something so pronounced that you would know with absolute certainty what your next step was?

But faith, dear ones, is not always about *certainty*. Faith is about *trust* in the face of uncertainty. "Blessed are those who have not seen, and believe anyway."

If you are here today and you are hankering after some sort of "sign" from God that will provide you with absolute certainty, I want to offer you this challenge. I want you to look at the lack of certainty in your life not as a hindrance, but as an invitation to blessing. Look on it as an opportunity to learn to *believe* what you have not yet been allowed to *see*.

This is not easy. It requires courage, and grace. But on the other side of the experience you just may find yourself gasping for breath and saying: *My Lord, and my God!*

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, we have the opportunity to believe what we have not yet been allowed to see. The bread and the wine are God's promise to us -- they are Jesus' reminder to us that "blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believed."

So receive these tokens of love and grace to you. Allow your hearts to burn within you. And then rise and go from this place with the words of Thomas on your lips: *My Lord, and my God!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.