

Doubting Thomas

John 20:19-31

We are like him. Thomas wanted visible proof. He said: "Unless I can see for myself and touch his wounds, I will not believe."

Here it is eight days later and eight days means a week. It means a week after Sunday. The disciples are together and the Lord appeared to them. When Thomas arrives, they report: "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas wanted to see for himself. It is called common sense philosophy. If you can see with your own eyes and hear with your own ears, then you can know for sure.

Consider Jerusalem at that time. Evidence shows that there were at least 100,000 people in the city. It may have been 500,000, but at minimum 100,000. And there was this sensational report that Jesus had risen from the dead. Of course, it could be like Lazarus but still an interesting matter.

And it was not that the disciples hid out. Because we know just after the Ascension, ten days later there are 3,000 of them there (Acts 2). In 1 Cor 15:6 it says that one time he appeared to five hundred brethren. And in those days, among those 100,000 or more residents of Jerusalem, you would think that at least half the people would say: "Prove it." If he has risen from the dead, prove it.

But that is not what happened. He appeared to a few. What does the text say? First, when the risen Christ appears to Thomas and says "Touch me," what did Thomas do? The text (John 20:28) does not say that Thomas touched him.

Instead, he responded with a confession: "My Lord and my God." (Compare Psalm 35:23 where it says "My God and my Lord." He could have been quoting the Psalm. The reversal of "God" and "Lord" is incidental.) It is not an exclamation of surprise like: "Oh my God!" Rather, this is a confession that says: He is God. The word "Lord" here means Yahweh or Jehovah.

[The confession, Jesus is Lord, is the basic Christian confession. Back in the 1950's there was a huge dispute among Lutherans over whether or not to belong to the World Council of Churches (WCC) because the Council's creed was weak. It said only that Jesus is God. The Eastern Orthodox objected, just as they had done at Nicea in 325, that this could be understood as the Arians did, that Jesus is a "secondary" God, that "there was when he was not," the first of all of God's creation. In 1961 the WCC creed was strengthened to say: "Jesus is Lord."]

In the second place, how does the book of Acts describe the impact of the resurrection? Luke writes (10:40-41): "God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

He only appeared to those who were chosen. We find this offensive. We say: We have to be able to prove it. God has to do the proving the way we insist he do it. This is our way of reasoning. We also say we have to have a choice otherwise there is no ethics. If we do not have free choice, then how can we be called upon to live a good life?

The common religion today is that there is a God, and God is good. Kierkegaard points out that there is an advantage to being a second generation believer. If you are first generation, you may be confused, thinking it has to do with **your** seeing and hearing. And that is a mistake. It is about the Lord's doing.

How offensive! We have these big words like predestination, election. We have got to be able to do at least something! The whole Reformation is about that. The Reformation, particularly Luther and Calvin, says No. It all ends up in being the great divide, that it all depends on how we think about anything. This includes big things as well as small things.

As it is written in the book of Hezekiah. . . . An Old Testament “book of Hezekiah” sounds plausible, but there is no such book. There are, however, two chapters in Isaiah about King Hezekiah. King Hezekiah had no real concern about anything except his own skin. He did not really care about Isaiah’s warning that the kingdom was going to fall. He did not care what would happen later. In Isaiah 39:8 King Hezekiah says to Isaiah: “The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my days.’” It was “good” because the impending disaster would not come during his lifetime. The important thing for Hezekiah is that truth was whatever he wanted it to be. It is the same for the common religion, not Christian, of our day: Truth is whatever you want it to be.

In the 1980’s there was a popular TV show hosted by Joseph Campbell, titled, “The Power of Myth,” the conclusion of which was that all religions are myths. You have your myth; I have mine. You have your opinion; I have mine. You have your interpretation; I have mine. Truth is whatever you think is truth.

What is truth? Natural science says: If everything is true, nothing is true. This was said by the Austrian (atheist) physicist Karl Popper. His axiom goes back to Aquinas and Aristotle. If you are in science, you laugh at the idea that truth is whatever you want it to be. The same is true in any of the intellectual disciplines.

What then is truth? We Christians have as our witness some very particular things. The first Christians knew well about myths of dying and rising gods. But they confessed: In **this** crucifixion and in **that** resurrection is what it is about. And went on to say, as Paul does in 1 Cor 2:2: “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

As in Revelation 1:8: “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” And the hidden power in that verse is the “I am.” “I am” is Jehovah, or God. And Revelation 1:17: “‘Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.’” And that describes why this is important.

Why bother with the keys to Death and Hades because in the common religion of our day there is no problem really because “thinking” is king. We can think death is the end, or we can think there is no judgment. We can think whatever we want when we, like gods, think we determine truth.

But death is, as it says in 1 Cor 15:26, “the last enemy.” And Hades is the first step into Hell. There are two steps to Hell in the book of Revelation. And Christ has the keys, he has conquered them. Then we go on as Protestants, particularly in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions: Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, the cross alone, to his glory alone. And by saying that we say it is this and not that. And in the Nicene Creed we do the same. It is this and not that. Because this is what it means to be Christian and affirm the death and resurrection of Christ.

To come back to this text in the book of Acts, 10:40-41, it concludes, and this is important for us as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper: “God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” He is the host. He is the one who is doing this, not some functionary like me. He is the host.

He is the one who is Lord of Death and Hades, the beginning and the end, and that makes all the difference. Amen.