

Doubting Thomas

John 20:19-31

A sermon for the First Sunday after Easter.

“Doubting Thomas.” Doubting Thomas is not the way it’s put in the text. He’s called Thomas the Twin. We call him “Doubting Thomas” because we like him. He’s the one who had the courage to say: “Unless I can actually touch the wounds, how can I know?” We all see that as common sense.

Thomas, doubting Thomas, is a great favorite. The text, however, doesn’t say that he actually did doubt. Just for the sake of discussion, assume that he did. Then he says in a confession: “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). There was for him this reality. Miraculous. He was actually able to see, to hear, and to touch.

In the text (John 20:29-31) the risen Jesus says to Thomas:

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

In the original language the word “sign” means the same as “miracle.” One could replace the word “sign” with “miracle” and the text would read: “He did many other **miracles** in the presence of his disciples but these are written so that you may believe.”

It’s important to look at what miracles are. There are five ways to do this.

The first comes from St. Augustine back in the Fourth and Fifth centuries. Augustine said that everything is a miracle. Everything is done by God.

The second way is to say: There are no miracles. Miracles are merely something we are examining, and if our reason, our common sense, tells us that there are no miracles, there are no miracles. Science tells us there are no miracles. We therefore would say that miracles are problems, but we really know that things are what they are as we see them. And the rest is your private, subjective opinion.

A third way, an alternative to this second perspective, is the “God of the gaps.” Miracles are those places which have not yet been explained by science.

Fourth, the church decides what a miracle is. This is what happens in the Roman Catholic Church when someone is beatified. To be beatified, the candidate must have done one miracle. For example, when Pope John Paul II was beatified in 2011, the miracle that was attributed to him was the healing of a nun from Parkinson's disease. When a miracle is being investigated, doctors are involved. If it happens that the diagnosis was incorrect, or if the problem recurs, that is not the issue. This has been defined as a miracle.

Fifth, it finally comes down to who God is and what God can do. Could God light a match under water? Of course. Science has made all kinds of discoveries in physics and chemistry. But could God create hills without valleys? Of course, but we wouldn't be able to perceive them. Could God create a stone so big that he couldn't lift it? That's a real conundrum. That's like the question: What happens when an irresistible force meets an unmovable object? (They get married!) In formal logic these examples are called fallacies. If one side of the dilemma is true, the other side is automatically false. We have to get beyond such tricks in logic to ask the real questions: Who is the living God? How does he act?

We are like the sorcerer's apprentice in the Disney musical, *Fantasia*. You remember the young apprentice attempts his master's magic tricks and can't control them. It all goes wild.

We all commit the basic sin, presumption, breaking the First Commandment. We think there is something in us that can understand God. We have something in us, like a spark, that is like God. We think we are not truly creatures because in us there is something more. Of course we don't remember that we are finite and God is not. We are caught in sin and death. That means our minds, our thinking, our reckoning is all lost. We think: "That just can't be." It offends our self-confidence in our ability to see through the world to God beyond.

What is our hope? Is there really no hope? Are there no miracles? Doesn't God really act? We think there has to be something God is doing somewhere, something we can know. There has to be

There are those who say there were miracles but only during the time of the New Testament. That age is over. As it says in John 20:29: "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe." We say the proper sequence is: First you see and then you believe. We'd rather have it that way even though it says: "Blessed are those who believe without seeing." How can we believe? How can this hope be real?

1 Peter 1:3 states: We have “a living hope.” Not an empty hope. Not like Pandora’s Box. Remember how she opened the box and let out all the evils of the world, and there was only one thing left: Hope. And the question is: Is that kind of hope good or evil?

What kind of hope, what kind of certainty, do we have? The Gospel of John is the second most difficult book in the New Testament. (Hebrews is the first.) It’s very important that we don’t pick and choose certain places but look at the total Gospel. According to John 20 Thomas first saw and then believed. Contrast that with the story about Lazarus where it says in effect: “First you believe and then you will see.” (John 11:40: “Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?”)

How does God work? It’s really spelled out in a remarkable text in John 12:37-42. We won’t read it now because it’s long, seven verses. The text points out that Jesus had done many miracles and the onlookers did not believe. Why was that?

The answer is found in Isaiah 6:9-10: God has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, “lest they should see with their eyes, and hear their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn for me to heal them” (Quoted in Matthew 13:14-15).

Why is it that some see and some do not? Some believe and some do not? In a parallel story in Acts 10:40-41, between the time of the resurrection and when he ascended, Jesus appeared to a lot of people. He appeared to Peter, to the Twelve, to five hundred. But what about all the people in Jerusalem and Galilee? There were thousands. The answer is found in Acts 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.”

These two verses show that God is not working according to our calculations and whatever our mixed-up thinking about “miracle” is.

No, the answer to all of this is: He has chosen us. He has determined that these are those who are his. And to those he appeared. They saw him and believed. They believed and they saw.

It’s put together another way in the Letter to the Ephesians 1:4: “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world.” Because this is his doing, we have confidence, certainty (Romans 6:5), and “a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3). God’s saving work is not

dependent on us but on him and he never fails. Amen.