

## ***Can I Get A Witness?***

A Sermon by the  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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Acts 4:32-35  
John 20:19-31

Thomas always reminds me of the person in the class who will ask the question the rest of us are too embarrassed to ask. Like during the first period math class when the teacher is at the board, on about the twenty-ninth step of a complicated equation that not all of us are following, it's Thomas who raises his hand and says, "Okay, but what's x back there in step two?" thereby allowing the rest of us to breathe a huge sigh of relief. Or when Jesus says to his gathered disciples, "And you know the way to the place where I am going." It's Thomas who says (on behalf of all of the disciples, I'm sure), "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Thomas is the one who will say what the rest of us want to say but don't, because we're afraid we'll look foolish or be thought of as not smart enough or faithful enough or good enough. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." How many of the disciples sat in silence the week before, perhaps in doubt or disbelief, in that long moment before Jesus showed them his hands and his side? Mary Magdalene had reported seeing the resurrected Jesus only that morning, but they apparently didn't believe her, because there they all were fighting off the nagging doubt that kept them hidden behind closed, locked doors.

Like the disciples, doubt and uncertainty at the very least make us terribly uncomfortable, and sometimes even frighten us. Pastor Amy Hunter, writing in the *Christian Century*, suggests that perhaps that's why we reject Thomas, because he brings doubt into our lives of faith.<sup>1</sup> And yet, she wonders if that's why we also like Thomas. After all, Paul Tillich reminds us that, "Serious doubt is confirmation of faith." When you take a closer look, you realize that Thomas is a practical, concrete kind of guy. Earlier in John's Gospel, it's Thomas who insists that the disciples accompany Jesus when he goes to Bethany, a place he'd had to leave under threat of being stoned. Thomas supports Jesus' apparently suicidal plan with, "Let us also go that we may die with him."

Amy Hunter asks, "So where is Thomas that first Easter evening when the other disciples are hiding in the upper room? Is he faithless, separating himself from the community? . . . Maybe Thomas can't imagine hiding when someone has just reported seeing Jesus alive. Perhaps he is trying to find out the truth. Or maybe he is the only disciple with enough sense to recognize that this hiding thing could take a long time, and that he'd better go out and get milk and bread for the group."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amy B. Hunter, "The Show-Me Disciple," *Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002, p. 17

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

That's Thomas - straightforward, curious, courageous, and plainspoken. Perhaps we like that about him because it's the way we'd like to approach the mystery and challenge of living as faithful witnesses to the resurrection. We'd like to be able to say, "yes, that's true, I saw that, I can give an eyewitness account, it's why I believe." It would make it so much easier.

Most of us probably resonate with this poem by Heather Murray Elkins entitled "The Younger Brother of Thomas" -

*"Thomas didn't really touch him.  
I would have.  
What can you prove just by looking?  
Since when is seeing believing?"*

*And then this story starts:  
that Jesus isn't dead,  
that he's been seen  
walking through walls,  
showing up at supper time.  
But nobody, nobody had touched him.  
Thomas didn't buy it.  
I wouldn't have either.  
Never listen to an eyewitness.  
Get the facts firsthand.  
Don't settle for someone  
you can't get a hold of.  
But then this ghost or hoax appeared  
and called his name.  
Thomas took one look  
and thought that he'd seen God.  
He really didn't touch him, see.  
But doubting Thomas believes.  
It would take more than that  
to convince me.  
Doubting runs in the family."<sup>3</sup>*

And that's where we usually stumble, because we're part of the family, and because the very nature of mystery is that it defies explanation and, frequently, eyewitness accounts. A well-known theologian once said, "Mystery is not an argument for the existence of God; mystery is an experience of the existence of God."<sup>4</sup> Bearing witness to the reality of the risen Christ in our lives often starts where the explanation of how it happened leaves off.

We are in the season of the church year called Eastertide, the seven weeks, the fifty days between Easter and Pentecost. The lectionary always gives us this text from John as the Gospel lesson for today, the second Sunday of Easter. This year, it's paired

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<sup>3</sup> Heather Murray Elkins, "The Younger Brother of Thomas," *Accent on Youth*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (spring 1985), reprinted with permission in *Imaging the Word*, Volume 2, p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, p. 327.

with the text from the book of Acts, that proclaims the great power with which the apostles gave their testimony – their witness – about the resurrection, to the whole group of those who believed, who were of one heart and one soul. This account is preceded by a number of incidents of the apostles witnessing to what they believed. We hear Peter – of all people, Peter the one we left weeping in a courtyard after a night of betrayal – we hear Peter proclaiming resurrection. To the assembled crowd, and not a very supportive one you might recall, Peter said, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.”

We see Peter and John arrested and brought before the chief priests and elders and warned not to talk about what they had seen. They responded by saying, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you, rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have heard and seen.” And, thanks be to God, it is a witness that is not limited to those who have seen it with their own eyes. As part of the family, we have inherited that legacy; at least we’re the most recent generation of disciples who have believed without first seeing.

The confession that Thomas makes in the upper room is not because he has touched the resurrected body of Jesus, but because Jesus has offered himself as proof, as motivation to nudge Thomas from unbelief to belief. The story, finally, is not so much about Thomas as it is about Jesus. Jesus offers Thomas what he needs for faith; he meets the conditions that Thomas sets for belief. And Thomas responds with what is surely one of the more profound confessions in the New Testament, “My Lord and my God.” There is little doubt about Thomas’ understanding of what has just happened to him.

What do we need for faith? What conditions do we set for belief? What makes us witness to the reality of God’s presence in our lives?

For some of us, the ability to witness to the power of the resurrection has come at a high cost, and it is an ongoing struggle with doubt. We have found ourselves in the deep water that threatens to cover us, in the fire that threatens to consume us that the prophet Isaiah speaks about. Life-threatening illness, chronic pain, debilitating depression, addiction, death, all work to undo the tenuous grasp we have on faith in the first place.

Even those whose faith seems amazingly unshaken by doubt know that it’s only by God’s grace. You might remember Sister Wendy Beckett, who had a program on public television in which she talked about great works of art. Her breadth of knowledge about art was remarkable and she was delightfully entertaining to watch. Prior to one of her shows, Terry Gross, the host of NPR’s “Fresh Air” had the chance to interview Sister Wendy. Now Sister Wendy is a cloistered nun as well as an art historian, so when she’s not doing her television show, she’s devoted to absolute silence, so interviewing her wasn’t the easiest task.

At one point during the interview, Gross asked Sister Wendy if she had always believed in God. “Oh, yes,” said Sister Wendy. Sounding somewhat dubious, Gross said, “You mean you’ve never experienced any doubt?” “No,” said Sister Wendy in her small but solid voice. “Why do you think that is?” asked Gross. And Sister Wendy said, “Well, I’m sure it’s because God knew I was too weak for doubt. I could never have stood it, so God kept it from me.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Told by Rev. Dr. Catherine Taylor, [www.day1.net](http://www.day1.net), April 27, 2003.

Be assured that many faithful people struggle continually with the doubt that creeps in at the most inopportune times. We often find that it's that very thin shred of faith that holds on to us, that keeps us from being paralyzed by the fear that so often accompanies the struggle. In the depths of despair, how many of us have prayed for some sign of God's presence, some sign that we haven't been abandoned to the illness or the grief or the pain? Wanting some kind of sign doesn't mean that you've lost your faith. You may still have the confidence in bad times to remember that you are loved by God; but you may also still have a deep desire for a tangible sign just to be reassured. For me, the sign was not that the child lived or the cancer went into remission, but rather that when the crisis passed, I was still standing, that God never let go of me.

For others, bearing witness comes with the simple dailyness of living into – and living out of – our relationship with God. When our children were little, we became friendly with a family down the block, as often happens. Their youngest boy was the same age as our oldest, and they became fast friends, playing together every day, sleeping over at one another's house, each becoming part of the other's family. Because they were devout Catholics, Richard, our son, learned something about their faith, including bedtime prayers said with the rosary, and stories of saints.

What we all learned one summer was what it means to live out your faith, even at the tender age of four. That was the summer Richard broke his leg and spent half of vacation in traction in the hospital, and the other half at home in a body cast. When we finally got him home, we honestly wondered how we would keep him entertained, flat on his back day after day for the next six weeks.

We needn't have worried. The first morning home, and every morning thereafter for the next month and a half, one of the children from this remarkable family – and there are five of them – would show up at the door to spend the day with Richard. If it was one of the younger boys, they would sit and build elaborate Lego sites; if it was one of the older girls, they would read to him or color with him or help me with the baby, so that I could spend time with him.

Looking back on that summer, I realize how much I learned from those children about bearing witness to the presence of God in our lives, because they did it every day, in a totally unself-conscious, generous, loving way. That's what witness looks like. I had just never put words around it before.

It's no wonder that we identify with Thomas. How can we do otherwise? And yet, just as Jesus offers Thomas what he needs to believe, the risen Christ offers us what we need to believe and hold fast to our faith. "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." And, like Thomas, sometimes all we can say is, "My Lord and my God!"

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." My Lord and my God. Amen.