

The Foundation of Our Faith (John 20:24-31)

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Sometimes the thing we most need to talk about is the one thing we're most reluctant to bring up. We hesitate to pursue counsel even when our marriage is on the rocks. We balk at confessing our struggle with pornography even though we feel enslaved. We refuse to share the details of our substance abuse while it's destroying our life.

Sadly, it happens even in the church. We're silent for all sorts of reasons, including pride in our public image. We crave the approval of men and are afraid of what people will think of us if we bring our troubles into the light. But sometimes we're silent because we see Christians around us and say to ourselves:

"Listen to the way they talk! Listen to the way they pray! They must have figured all this God stuff out and now their lives are just clicking along. What would they know about spiritual struggles? What would they know about the creeping doubts, the lingering skepticism, or the stubborn unbelief in my heart and mind when it comes to the Christian faith?"

More than you might think, my friend. Jn 19-20 is arguably the high point of the Gospel of John, the climax of God's work to rescue us from our rebellion against him and the judgment we deserve. The trustworthiness of Jesus is on full display. If John were a movie, it's the kind of moment everyone cheers, and the credits begin to roll.

But that's not what happens. Instead, one of Jesus' own disciples, someone who has listened to his teaching and followed him everywhere for the better part of three years, refuses to believe in his resurrection. I for one am grateful he did! And I'm especially grateful the Spirit inspired the Apostle John to include Thomas' experience in his gospel. Why? Because Thomas isn't alone.

Many of us struggle, Christian and non-Christian alike, to believe Jesus is who he says he is. The battle to trust Jesus, to rest assured, not just in theory, but in the depths of our soul, that he really is the Christ, the Son of God, and follow him accordingly, is the great battle of our lives. Here's the million-dollar question. Why should we believe Jesus? On what basis should you place your confidence in him?

Is faith in him the result of a personal spiritual experience? Some people have it and some people don't? Maybe it's a leap in the dark. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, you just have to believe. Perhaps you're in two minds. Part of you wants to believe Jesus is who he says he is. But part of you doesn't. You feel stuck and wonder if you'll ever change, if genuine faith in Jesus is even possible. You see it in other people. You long to have it yourself.

The end of Jn 20 is a precious gift, friends, because it speaks directly to our struggle with unbelief, God's posture toward us in the battle, and the ultimate basis for faith in Christ. Whether you're wrestling with faith yourself or trying to help a friend who is, we need to pay attention to what the Lord teaches us here.

1) UNBELIEF TOWARD JESUS EXPOSES OUR FAITH IN SOMEONE ELSE (vv. 24-25)

V. 24 sets the stage. We learn one of Jesus twelve disciples, Thomas, was not with the other disciples when the resurrected Christ first appeared to them back in Jn 20:19-20. "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord."

John doesn't tell us why Thomas was missing. He simply says (v. 24) he was "not with them when Jesus came." But that doesn't stop Jesus' other disciples from telling Thomas what they saw! After all, what did Jesus commission them to do in v. 21? "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." Sending them to do what? To tell the world what they had seen and heard! To speak of the reality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and the salvation he's won for us as a result.

In v. 25, the disciples are doing exactly what Jesus told them to do. "Thomas, we've seen the Lord! He's not dead. He's alive. The cross wasn't the end at all. Everything Jesus said about the indestructible power of his life, that he wasn't just a man, but the Eternal God in human flesh, it's all true." They proclaimed the true word of a resurrected Savior to Thomas as the Lord's chosen ambassadors.

And because their eyewitness testimony was so convincing and their presentation of the message of the gospel so polished, Thomas believed them then and there. Not exactly. V. 25, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my

fingers into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." The two words translated as "never" create the strongest possible negation in Greek. It means, "I will surely not believe. There's no way I'll believe."

It's striking how even in his skeptical state, Thomas views the crucifixion as an indisputable, historical fact. How would he recognize Jesus if he were to rise from the grave? By the wounds in his hands and side. Like so many in John's gospel, Thomas spoke better than he knew. Rev 5:6, "And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain..."

Friends, the cross is where the identity of Jesus comes most fully into view. Yes, he did all manner of good works when he walked the earth, but the cross is where we see him for who he really is – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Thomas got one thing exactly right. Jesus is known and will forever be known by his scars. If you want to know who Jesus is, look to the cross. That's where the weight of his glory is most clearly seen.

Yet Thomas also got something else wrong. The Word of God is communicated to him by an authoritative, apostolic witness – "We have seen the Lord!" – and he refuses to believe it. It's not good enough, not enough evidence as far as Thomas is concerned. He will only believe on his terms, not God's. His faith is built on human reason, on what his own powers of physical observation tell him about God instead of what God has revealed about himself. The only things that are true in Thomas' book are things he has empirically verified through personal experience.

It sounds noble, admirably independent, dare I say, downright American! But it's fundamentally arrogant. The conditions Thomas sets forth for his faith expose the true object of his faith. Who ultimately determines whether something is true? It's not Jesus. It's not God at all. It's Thomas. More specifically, it's what Thomas can observe with his own eyes. His own senses are the final arbiter. What his eyes perceive is true. What his eyes cannot perceive is not true.

Thomas had yet to believe in the resurrected Christ because he still believed in someone else, namely himself. He wasn't a man who lacked faith. He had tremendous faith. Great faith! It was simply misplaced. The implicit critique here is not that Thomas needed reasons for faith or a basis for his belief. The problem is

that the Word of God, which Thomas had heard from both Jesus himself and his chosen ambassadors, played second fiddle to his own understanding.

We detect in his attitude something of what Jesus critiqued in Jn 4:48, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” Unless I do miracles that pass muster in the courtroom of human reason, you will not believe me. That’s not genuine faith. That’s signs faith. Genuine faith is rooted in the person of Jesus, in the Word and character of our unchanging Creator who cannot lie. Signs faith is rooted in whether God passes the tests we set up for him in our own mind.

Until he heals my body, I won’t trust him. Until he saves my kids, I’m not sure I can believe him. Until he changes my wife, gives me a husband, or provides some other kind of physical proof that he is who he says he is, there’s no way I’m leaning the weight of my life on him. Meet my standard first, Jesus. Give me the real object of my trust and then I’ll throw some faith leftovers in your direction.

Consider this. How stable, how reliable is a faith built on our limited, ever-changing, personal experience? Do you really want to say the only things in the universe that can possibly be true are things you have seen with your own eyes? We rationalize our lack of faith in Jesus as a failure on his part to provide enough evidence. The real issue is that we don’t want to give up the tremendous faith we already have in ourselves and the kind of evidence we demand Jesus provide as a result.

2) JESUS OVERCOMES OUR UNBELIEF IN THE GREATNESS OF HIS MERCY (vv. 26-28)

If you were Jesus, how would you respond to a man like Thomas, to someone you had graciously given piles of reasons, mountains of evidence, for believing and trusting you for three years? Never once did Jesus fail to keep his word. Never once did he act against the Father’s will. He demonstrated his divine power over and over again – sign, after sign, after sign. To which Thomas says, “Sorry pal. Not good enough.” I’ll tell you how I would probably respond. “Not good enough, eh Thomas? Well, let’s see how good things turn out for you apart from me. Good luck.”

Aren’t you grateful Jesus doesn’t do that? And not just with Thomas, but with all his disciples. Why do I say that? Because even the faith of those who had seen Jesus a week earlier remained incredibly weak! What are all the disciples doing, Thomas included, a week after Jesus commissioned them to go out as ambassadors of the

gospel? They're still meeting inside with the doors locked. They're still ruled by fear. They have yet to be filled with the Holy Spirit Jesus promised in v. 22 and the boldness and power for witness he imparts.

Thomas isn't alone. They all need Jesus to strengthen their faith. Remember that, Christian, whenever you're talking to someone who's struggling with skepticism or unbelief. What they need Jesus to do for them is categorically no different than what we all need Jesus to do. Faith is a gift, and every good gift comes from above.

So what does Jesus do? V. 26, "Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" It's the same thing he did and said back in v. 19! How patient our Lord is, brothers and sisters. He does not tire of taking initiative to reveal himself to us again and again.

And when he says, "Peace be with you," he's saying a whole lot more than, "Don't freak out." "Peace be with you" is nothing less than a declaration of the rich peace of the gospel. It's not a peace rooted in emotional frames subject to constant change. It's the sturdy promise, the unchanging reality, of restored relationship with our Creator through the life, death, and resurrection of the Son.

But Jesus knows one of them has yet to experience that peace. He doesn't need Thomas to fill him in. He knows exactly what he said last Sunday. Ps 139:4, "Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether." He was intimately aware of his skepticism and unbelief. V. 27, "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side.'"

Did Jesus owe Thomas that kind of in-your-face, seeing-with-his-physical-eyes sort of experience? No. He had already given him more than enough reasons to trust him. So why did he condescend to give Thomas the very sort of personal experience he demanded? It wasn't because he decided to accommodate his unbelief. He did it for this reason, friends.

Ex 34:6, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..." He had mercy on Thomas. That's why. He delights to show mercy to you too, friend. Do not believe the lie of Satan that until you find a way to muster up some real faith God wants nothing to do with

you. He will not ignore or overlook unbelief. And he is faithful to pursue his own when we're stuck in unbelief, holding forth his wounded hands.

If your faith in Jesus is weak, if your faith in Jesus is non-existent, here's what you need to do because this is the work our Savior delights to do! Ponder, meditate, gaze, and consider the love he demonstrated and the deliverance he accomplished by laying down his life for you. Is there an important place for apologetic books and conversations that traffic in how the biblical canon was formed, the archeological evidence for biblical history, or a Christian response to the problem of evil? Absolutely.

But that is not and nor will it ever be the foundation of our faith. Jesus is and will forever be known, loved, and trusted, on account of his scars. What do his scars reveal? The good news, the mind-transforming, heart-overwhelming, will-conforming reality that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Why? So that all who repent of their sins and look to him for deliverance from the wrath we deserve might receive the stunning gift of abundant, eternal life as fellow heirs with Christ.

So Jesus urges Thomas to make a choice, the same choice he urges us to make again and again. "Do not disbelieve, but believe," or literally, "Do not be unbelieving. Be believing." Yes, faith in Jesus is a gift. But it's also a choice. With the power he provides, we must exercise our will and choose to submit to King Jesus, entrusting ourselves to him. That's exactly what Thomas does in v. 28 in one of the most beautiful declarations of faith in Jesus in the entire Bible. "Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'"

He doesn't say, "You are the Lord," or, "You are God," or, "I recognize you must have risen from the grave," as if agreeing with sound doctrine is sufficient. It's not, friend. What does he say? You are MY Lord. You are MY God. He personally relies on Jesus in light of who the resurrection proves him to be as HIS Lord and HIS God. That's what faith is. It's informed, personal reliance on Jesus to give us life.

Each one of us must make the same choice. Will you be a man or woman who disbelieves or believes? There is no neutral territory. There is no one-foot-in-each-camp option. To ignore the choice or postpone the choice is to make a choice, to choose unbelief. In view of his wounds – the steadfast love he lavished on us at the cross, and in view his resurrection – the victory he won for us over sin and death, I

urge you, I implore you, trust in Jesus. Confess with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!”

Christian, whenever you encounter someone who is similarly mired in unbelief, follow Jesus’ example. Be merciful. Be compassionate. Don’t think you have to answer all their objections to faith. Help them where you can. But more than anything else, point them to Jesus. Tell them of the abundant life you have in him! It’s not your apologetic smarts that will win the day. It’s the beauty of Christ in the gospel of our salvation. Jesus overcomes our unbelief in the greatness of his mercy.

3) THE FAITH THAT BRINGS LIFE IS ROOTED IN THE WORD OF CHRIST (vv. 29-31)

Jesus immediately affirms the authenticity of Thomas’ faith. Yet he does so in a way that directs all of us to the foundation of our faith. V. 29, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Jesus is not saying the disciples who believed Jesus because they physically saw him are not blessed or that their faith is suspect. He’s not deprecating eyewitness faith. Rather, he’s urging us to locate our faith not in our personal experience or what we have seen with our own eyes (as helpful as those gifts are), but rather in the enduring foundation of God’s Word. Vv. 30-31, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.”

Remember what Jesus prayed in Jn 17:20 before he died. “I do not ask for these only (the disciples who saw him with their own eyes), but also for those who will believe in me through their word.” Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the apostle John who wrote this book became the answer to Jesus’ prayer! The divinely-intended effect of reading John’s gospel, studying John’s gospel, meditating on John’s gospel, is faith in Jesus. It’s the ultimate purpose of the book!

Here’s what that means. Those who have “not seen and yet have believed” in v. 29 are not those who treat faith in Jesus like some sort of leap in the dark. “I can’t see Jesus. I have no reason to believe he is who he says he is, but I’m just going to believe him anyway.” No. Faith isn’t a leap in the dark. It’s a response to the light of God’s Word! What God has said – not what we have physically seen – is the

foundation of our faith. The life-giving alternative to the arrogance of unbelief enslaved to human reason is the humility of faith grounded in divine revelation.

Faith that he was a real person? Faith that he had some good things to say? Faith that somehow he will make things work out for you in the end? No. Informed, personal reliance on Jesus because he is the Christ, the Son of God. What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ? It means he is the Anointed One sent by the Father to make right all our sin has made wrong. What does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God? It means the One the Father sent is none less than the Eternal God himself, clothed in human flesh. "Son of God" highlights his divine identity. "Christ" highlights his saving work.

And notice, the point of God's Word in general and the Gospel of John in particular is not to convince us to believe in Jesus for the sake of being a person of faith. The result of believing Jesus, the great reward of faith in Jesus, is the joy (v. 31) of having "life in his name." That's not just life in heaven. That's life here and now!

As Pastor Tim Keller writes in his book, *Making Sense of God*, only through faith in Jesus will you find a meaning that suffering can't take from you, a satisfaction that is not based on circumstances, an identity that doesn't crush you or exclude others, a hope that can face anything, and a justice that does not create new oppressors.

Those are not blessings Jesus gives apart from himself as if he were some sort of therapeutic genie or purveyor of spiritual goodies. They describe the kind of life we have because we have him! The life faith in Jesus affords is life "in his name," which means Jesus is both the object of our faith (the one we're trusting) and the reward of our faith (the blessing we receive as a result).

His peace becomes our peace. His joy becomes our joy. His holiness becomes our holiness. His riches become our inheritance. His righteousness becomes our righteousness. His access to the Father becomes our access to the Father. The "life" Christianity offers is not a cleaned-up version of life in ourselves or the stuff of this world. It's life in Jesus, the eternal, soul-satisfying comfort of knowing him, loving him, and serving him. That's the life God longs for you to enjoy and died to make possible.

Where do we turn to find it? Where do we go to strengthen our faith in Jesus and our experience of life in his name? We go to God's Word. We look to God's Word.

The most important habit you can build this year is not a new diet, a new workout, or a new budget, as good as those things are. It's consistent time devoted to reading God's Word. Because this is where God reveals the goodness of Jesus that we might trust him for who he is. The faith that brings life is rooted in the Word of Christ.

CONCLUSION

One of my pastoral goals for our church this year is that we would grow in reading good Christian books that help us understand and apply God's Word. I want to conclude this sermon a little differently than normal by highlighting four books that develop the principle of biblical faith - informed, personal reliance on Jesus to give us life.

The first is William Taylor's One to One series of Bible studies. Faith in Jesus grows in the soil of God's Word. That's the whole point of v. 31. If you want to help a friend who has yet to trust Jesus learn to trust Jesus, invite them to read the Gospel of John with you and use Taylor's booklets to guide your conversation. If you stop by the book shop this morning, you can order a copy for free!

The second resource is an older book by Randy Newman called, "Questioning Evangelism." Jesus often responded to unbelief by asking thoughtful questions. Randy does a fantastic job explaining how we can follow his example and engage in humble conversation with skeptics that points them back to God's Word.

The third resource is from Ligonier Ministries. It's called, "A Field Guide on False Teaching." In a few short paragraphs, it contrasts faith that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," with other religions like deism, Buddhism, Hinduism, new age spirituality, or secularism. The chapters are super accessible and filled with Scripture references.

The final resource is by Greg Gilbert. It's called "Assured." This is a book written primarily to Christians who struggle with knowing whether they really do believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. If you're questioning the authenticity of your faith, Gilbert will serve you well.

To whatever degree you realize your faith is weak and want to grow, don't despair, friend. Don't hide. Don't run away from God. Cast yourself on the mercy of Christ.



He delights to do for us what he did for Thomas. And make a priority of lingering in the fountain of God's Word. Read his Word. Meditate on his Word. Study his Word with a friend, knowing the faith that brings life is rooted in the Word of Christ.

1 Pe 1:8-9 captures the sweet fruit of informed, personal reliance on Jesus to give us life. May this be our growing testimony as a church. "Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."