

April 23 – So Like Thomas

John 20: 19 - 31

December 11, 2016. Does that date ring a bell with any of you? 38 – 10. Does that score mean anything to you? Well, on December 11, 2016, the Green Bay Packers defeated the Seattle Seahawks by a score of 38 – 10. I am a Green Bay fan; most people in this area are not. So, a few days after the game, when I was talking with a Seahawk fan, we had a decidedly different opinion of how the game went as well as the final outcome. Presented with the exact same situation, we came to totally opposite conclusions based strictly on our point of view, or, as Bill has said before, based on what lens we were looking through. As a Packer fan, I thought it was a great game; as a Seahawk fan, my friend did not. And so it is with many things in life – how we perceive things so often depends upon where we're coming from. We filter our ideas, beliefs, and even our actions through an "it depends" filter. And when that filter is faith, it changes everything.

In our scripture reading this morning, Thomas had a very definite "it depends" filter. His believing that Jesus was alive depended on his being able to see Him – to put his fingers and his hands in Christ's wounds. Without physical proof that Jesus was alive, he was not going to believe it.

Thomas was one of the original disciples, he had eaten, slept, and traveled with Jesus and the other disciples for three years. Yet, even though he had eye witness testimony from all the other disciples that Jesus was alive and they had seen Him, Thomas' belief in Jesus' resurrection depended on him being able to see Jesus, himself. He wouldn't have faith until he saw Him with his own eyes.

Sitting here in the 21st century, knowing "The rest of the story" as Paul Harvey used to say, Thomas' lack of faith might seem strange to us. But, Thomas had seen Jesus die with his own eyes, and death is usually pretty much final. Of course, with his own eyes, Thomas had also seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the grave; with his own eyes he had also seen Jesus raise the widow's son from the dead; but he was having trouble believing that Jesus could raise *himself* from the dead, even though Jesus had actually told the disciples what was going to happen.

On the night He was betrayed, before they went to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told the disciples that He was going to go away from them for a while but that He would be back. John records it this way, in chapter 16, verses 19 – 22:

“Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him; so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’? Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

So, Thomas had seen Jesus raise others from the dead; Thomas had been told by Jesus that He would go away for a little while and then come back; Thomas was told by the other disciples that they had seen Jesus alive; but, because Thomas had seen the bad, he was struggling to have faith that he would see the good that Jesus had promised.

Aren't we many times just like Thomas? When we are struggling with sadness and disappointments and things that are going wrong, don't we sometimes find it hard to have the faith to believe that we will eventually rejoice and once again have joy in our lives? This, despite the fact that the Bible is full of God's promises for our well-being.

Let's look again at what Jesus says to Thomas once he finally does believe. In John 20, verse 29, we read, “Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Folks, that's us. All of us who have not seen Him and yet believe that Jesus is alive are blessed. As a result of our faith, Jesus says we are blessed.

Do you feel blessed this morning? Do you have faith that Jesus is alive?

In 2 Corinthians 5: 6, 7 Paul writes, “So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight.”

As Christians, we are to live by faith and not trust only in those things we can actually see. But, like Thomas, we sometimes struggle to have faith.

And Thomas wasn't the only disciple who sometimes had a problem maintaining their faith, even in things that they saw. In Matthew, we have the account of Jesus coming to the disciples walking on the water. The disciples had been in the boat for several hours but were not making much headway because of the wind and the waves. If you have ever been in a boat during a storm, you know that that is a bit of a scary situation in and of itself. But, now the disciples saw someone coming toward them walking on the water and they were terrified, because they thought they were seeing a ghost. But, Jesus called out to them and told them it was Him and said, "Do not be afraid". Peter, Mr. Impetuous said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." So, Jesus said, "Come", and Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water toward Him. But, because of the strong wind and the waves, Peter became afraid and started to sink and called out for Jesus to save him. Jesus immediately reached out and caught him and said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Even after spending three years with Him, Thomas had trouble having faith that Jesus could really be alive. Even with Jesus physically present right in front of him, Peter had trouble maintaining his faith when he saw the storm around him. If two of the original disciples had trouble "keeping the faith" is it any wonder that we might sometimes have trouble maintaining our faith?

Yet, is it really so difficult to live a life of faith?

How many of us have seen pictures of the Tacoma Narrows bridge swaying in the wind and eventually breaking up, dropping pieces into the water below? How many of us have heard the statistic that estimates that 30% of drivers are under the influence of alcohol or drugs at any given time? How many of us have read the latest health department inspection report for our favorite restaurant?

Yet, how many of us would not get into our cars, drive across the Tacoma Narrows bridge and have dinner at a nice restaurant for fear that the bridge might collapse, or we might get hit by a drunk driver, or we might get food poisoning?

We could go on and on with examples of things we do every day that represent acts of faith. We actually live our lives every minute with a tremendous amount of faith. So, living by faith is not difficult – the issue is, where will we place our faith?

Our first hymn today was, “Standing on the Promises”. How about if we place our faith in God’s promises?

We’ve already read that Jesus told Thomas that those who believe are blessed, and that includes us.

In Jeremiah 29:11 we read, “For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Romans 8:28 says, “For we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.”

In John 16: 33 Jesus says, “These things I have spoken to you that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

The 11th chapter of Hebrews is a recounting of how many people in the Bible were blessed as a result of their faith.

The entire book of Job shows how faith in God results in even greater blessings after great disappointments.

And, of course, we have the promise of Jesus found in Matthew 28, verse 20, “Remember, I am with you always to the end of the age”.

So, here we are: one week past the celebration of Christ’s resurrection; one week past the day that marks the fulfillment of God’s plan for our salvation and eternal life; one week past the day that commemorates Jesus’ victory over sin and death; one week past the day that should put joy into the hearts of all believers.

Today, some of us probably are feeling like a blessed believer. Others of us may be going through those tribulations that Jesus spoke of. But, all of us are living with Christ’s promise to always be with us.

One of my very favorite passages of scripture comes from the eighth chapter of Romans, which concludes with these verses:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

So, how happy we are this morning, how much peace and joy we feel, depends: it depends upon whether we believe that Jesus is still alive and is with us; it depends upon us accepting the promises of God throughout the Bible; it depends upon us remembering those times in our own lives when God was with us through tribulations; it depends on our believing the witness of millions of people for over two thousand years who have had Jesus with them in their hour of need.

When we live our lives looking through the filter of faith, we can have the peace and joy that comes from knowing that we can depend on God.