

Late to the Party

On this *Sunday after Easter* we are going to give some attention to the Biblical account of the days following the Resurrection of Jesus.

Some of these days on the Church calendar have special names. The Sunday before Easter is Palm Sunday. The Friday before Easter is Good Friday, and the Thursday before Easter is Maundy Thursday.

Do you know what the Sunday after Easter is commonly called on the Church calendar? It is ***Associate-Pastors-Preach Sunday***... since a lot of pastors take some vacation time after the busyness of Easter. Some call it *empty-pew* Sunday, since it is often a Sunday of low attendance... but since we don't have pews, we don't believe in that.

By the way, we did set a sort of record last Sunday with attendance. It was a great day; thank you to the many who brought guests with you to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus at Northshore.

While I have been guilty of an *Associate-Pastor-Preaches-Sunday* in the past... today you're getting me. I hope you are not too disappointed.

We are going to turn our attention to the Gospel of John, chapter 20... with an emphasis on the episode portrayed here starting with verse 24:

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." ¹



¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 20:24–29). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Thomas... often referred to as *Doubting* Thomas. If you have been listening to me preach over the years, you might remember that I've been on a campaign to **rehabilitate** the image we have of Thomas; I don't think it is fair (or even all that accurate) to refer to Thomas primarily as *Doubting* Thomas... it is a *bum rap*.

Even this dramatic portrayal we just watched made Thomas out to be a bit of a dullard. Sure, he was **late to the party**, and was not willing to believe without seeing for himself... but let's remember that everyone else in the room **had seen** Jesus for themselves. Sure, Thomas was **late to the party**, and was nowhere to be found... but all the others were scattered too. Thomas wanted to see for himself... just as all the others had seen for themselves. So... let's stop with all the *doubt shame*; Thomas needed to see just like everyone else.

The account starts with verse 1 of chapter 20.

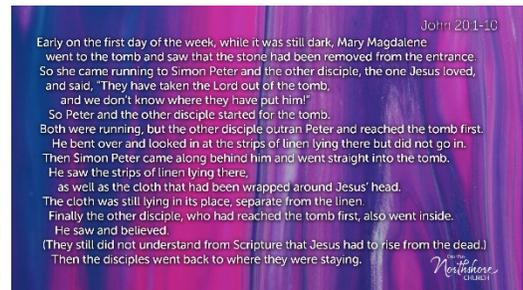
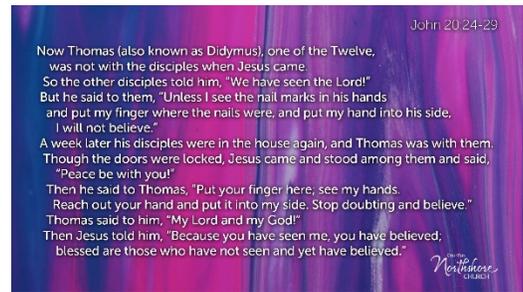
Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"²

Who is "we?" The Gospel of John names Mary Magdalene (who appeared to be the leader); the other Gospels fill in some more details. Mark records:

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.³

So at least these three women were the first on the scene of the Resurrection. It was confusing; they were there to mourn and care for the dead body of Jesus... but they found the stone rolled away and an empty tomb.

Their first assumption was not Resurrection, but rather treachery. They saw how unjustly Jesus had been treated, and now that treachery seemed to persist even after His death.



² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 20:1-2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mk 16:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

But Mary Magdalene saw and believed... or more accurately, she **heard** and believed; when Jesus spoke her name she began to understand.

¹⁵ He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

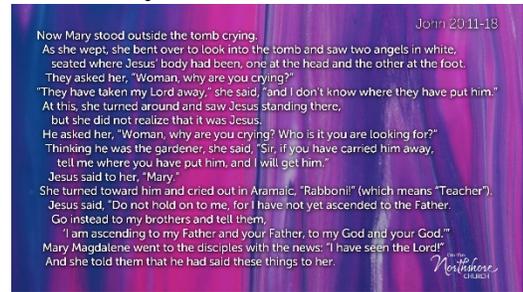
Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).

¹⁷ Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her. ⁴



Mary Magdalene, and the women with her, were the first to tell the Good News. It puts me in mind of a cartoon I saw recently.

“So Ladies... thanks for being the first to witness and report the Resurrection. And we’ll take it from here.”

Whatever the Church and culture have done to marginalize women over the centuries... that does not come from Jesus.



Preaching the Gospel, spreading the Good News, leading the Church *and all* is not reserved for a gender, or special class of any sort. When we see Jesus, when we hear Jesus, when we see Jesus at work, when we know Jesus, we are all called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. Nobody is in an elevated place to “take it from here.”

So the Disciples heard the firsthand account from Mary and her friends. It aligned with the empty tomb that Peter and John saw... and it aligned with everything that Jesus said leading up to His crucifixion. So, of course, they rose up in great faith and power... right?

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 20:15–18). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Well... not exactly.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders⁵

It appears that, even though they had heard what happened, there was still more **fear** than **faith**. It would take more:

Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."²² And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."⁶

Two things happened:

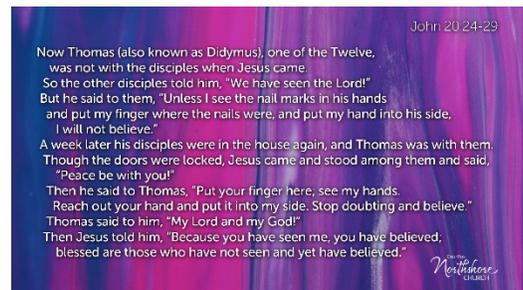
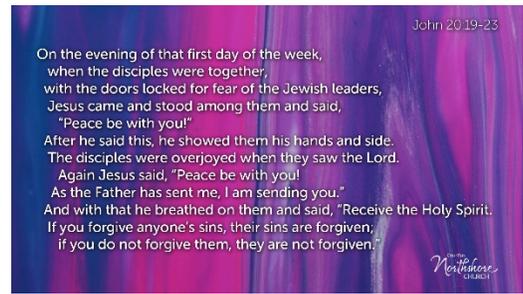
- They saw the Lord, and
- They were given the Holy Spirit.

It was then that faith overpowered fear. It was then that they were empowered to believe and proclaim the Gospel. It was then that they were ready to do the work of the Church.

This same Spirit is promised to all who believe. When we say things like "having Jesus in our hearts," this is what we mean... Jesus breathes a new life into us... that the Holy Spirit takes hold of our lives, filling those with power to believe, to be delivered from sin, to have faith to experience Jesus and tell of His power and work.

So... **Thomas** wanted the same. His friends told Thomas the Good News; they told him that they had seen the Lord... and he wanted the same.

When we read the account, we might cast aspersions on Thomas, even giving him a name like *Doubting* Thomas... but there is no record of his friends treating him that way. They had to know that Thomas was simply experiencing what they experienced; they had heard but they were still afraid...until they saw Him.



⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 20:19). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 20:19–22). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Hearing wasn't enough for them, and it wasn't enough for Thomas. There is no record that any of the Disciples told Thomas to stop doubting; only Jesus said that... and it was, of course, after Thomas saw Jesus.

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"⁷

This was a profound statement of faith: "My Lord and my God." Thomas saw and believed, and we can be sure that the Holy Spirit was at work. He didn't merely identify Jesus as his friend, nor did he merely identify Him as a teacher or rabbi; Thomas proclaimed Jesus as **Lord** and **God**.

This was Thomas being *Thomas*. He shows up elsewhere in the Gospels, especially in the John. We see Thomas as one who asks questions; and we see Thomas as one who was **loyal... all in**. When Jesus set out for Bethany after he heard that His friend Lazarus was dying, while the others warned of the danger that could await Jesus in Bethany, it was Thomas who said "let's go, even if it means we die with him." Thomas was loyal... all in.

History and Church tradition tell us that Thomas was *all in* from that point on until the end. It seems that Thomas eventually took the Gospel to India, where he was martyred.

When Thomas believed, here is how Jesus responded:

Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."⁸

Is that us? Are we among "those who have not seen and yet have believed"?

We can read in the Gospels and the Book of Acts that Jesus, before He ascended to Heaven, charged His followers to proclaim the Gospel to all. The Holy Spirit was poured out, the Church was born, and the Gospel continues to make its way into every corner of the earth. We who believe today are among the ongoing result.

In that way we are among "those who have not seen and yet have believed." But is it really a matter of not seeing at all?

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 20:26–28). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 20:29). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Notice that Jesus does not say that those who have not seen and yet believe are **more** blessed.

It seems to me that the ongoing work of the Spirit is a matter of believing and seeing, a mix of faith with experience.

It is unlikely that many here have had a vision of Jesus... while it does seem to happen from time to time. But I know that many have **seen Jesus** through His work, in and through our lives. We see Jesus changing lives. We see Jesus delivering from the power of sin. We see Jesus bringing freedom. We see Jesus healing. We see Jesus empowering people to do extraordinary things in His Name.

We see and it builds our faith.

We see Jesus and faith arises, giving us courage to proclaim His Good News, and do extraordinary things... perhaps even giving our lives like Thomas.

Some read the story of Thomas and their takeaway is to **not doubt**; I think the story of Thomas is here so that we can put doubt in its place, so that we can process our doubt in a life of faith. When we doubt, when faith seems weak, perhaps we should do what Thomas did and look for Jesus.

Is the lesson to not doubt; or is the lesson that Jesus reveals himself to the doubter. Jesus did not disqualify the doubter; Jesus overcame doubt and fear by showing up. So, in like fashion... our moments of doubt don't disqualify us either. Perhaps it is just an opportunity for Jesus to show up.

I think we sometimes think that Jesus only shows up when there is great, mountain moving faith. But the episode with Thomas makes it undeniably clear that Jesus shows up in the midst of doubt too.

Ever feel like you are **late to the party**? Ever feel like Thomas, having missed out? Perhaps we can be like Thomas and almost stubbornly **look for Jesus**... to see Jesus in ways others have seen Him.



I have in mind to take a few minutes here at the close of things, to look for Jesus. I've asked some people to be ready to pray. We're going to take some time and look for Jesus to be active in our lives.

How could Jesus show up today?

We'll pray and see what Jesus does. Perhaps we will see Him work, or perhaps it will be a moment when faith arises whether we see or not; perhaps we'll be among "those who have not seen and yet have believed". Whatever the case, this is a good time to pray.

Do we doubt that God cares, or even sees?

Do we doubt that God has any interest or power in our circumstances?

Do we doubt that He has answers?

Let's look for Jesus together today.