

“Believing Thomas”
John 20:24-31
April 18, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We come this morning to John 20:24-31.

Jesus has been crucified. Jesus has died, and been buried. And then on Sunday morning the tomb was found empty, and Jesus, risen from the dead, appeared to a number of his disciples – but not all of them.

And that is where we pick up this morning.

With that said, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

^{20:24} Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although 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, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we gather this morning because we love your Word.
We want it to be our meditation day and night.
We know that your revelation to us
offers more wisdom than the wise of the world,
it gives us more understanding than the great thinkers of the world,
it gives us deeper understanding than the old and experienced of the world.
It holds us back from evil,
and keeps us from straying from you.
And it is sweet to us,
sweeter than honey in our mouths.

Through it we gain understanding,
and we learn to reject every false way.
Teach us now from your word, we ask.
In Jesus's name. Amen
[Based on Psalm 119:97-104]

Introduction

Our text this morning is familiar to many of us. And though Thomas shows up several times in the gospel accounts, this is the story that is primarily associated with him – to the extent that though the gospels themselves call him Thomas the Twin, today he is known by most as “Doubting Thomas.”

Now, on one level, Thomas's title is fair when we think of the faith Jesus called him to and how he struggled with it. It's a bit less fair when we think of his relationship to the other ten disciples. After all, they all got to see Jesus on that first Easter Sunday, and we don't have much reason to be confident that many of the other disciples would have done much better than Thomas did if they had been put in the same situation. [Carson, 656] And, most of all, it's not very fair of us to stand in judgment on Thomas ourselves, when we have as much in common with him as we often do.

We should also note that the emphasis of the text is not ultimately on Thomas's doubt, but on his eventual faith. We may start with Thomas's skepticism, but the passage ends with Thomas making the strongest confession of Jesus's identity up to that point. It is Thomas who first identifies Jesus not only as his King, but also as his God. [Carson, 659]

And as one scholar has pointed out, the process by which Thomas gets there – the process he goes through in just a few short verses – gives us an especially important picture or model for how Jesus transforms not only *what* we believe, but *how* we believe. [Wright, *Resurrection*, 22]

And what we see there is a transformation of Thomas's epistemology.

Now, what do I mean by that? Epistemology is the subject of how we know what we know. And so it's not mainly about *what* we know, but *how* we know it – really how we know anything. Epistemology is about what the basis is of our knowledge or our beliefs.

And the story of Thomas here is a story of Jesus interacting with, and ultimately transforming Thomas's epistemology.

And we see this play out in four steps:

- First Jesus hears his disordered epistemology.
- Second, Jesus accommodates his disordered epistemology.
- Third, Jesus confronts his disordered epistemology.
- And fourth, Jesus reorders his epistemology.

So: Jesus hears, Jesus accommodates, Jesus confronts, and then Jesus reorders where Thomas places his ultimate confidence for how he knows what he knows.

Jesus Hears Our Disordered Epistemology

So first, Jesus hears Thomas's disordered epistemology.

Thomas states the epistemology he is starting with in verse twenty-five, and Jesus makes it clear that he heard that statement in verse twenty-seven.

Thomas said: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Thomas's epistemology – his outlook on how he can know something is true – is that the highest, and most confident form of knowledge he can have is the experience of his own senses: his sense of sight and his sense of touch. And he essentially demands that Jesus submit to that primary epistemology – to be seen and touched – and only then, Thomas says, will he believe.

Now, we might ask: What's wrong with that?

Many people would consider this a sign of Thomas's wisdom and shrewdness. After all, what could be more reliable than your own assessment of things? Isn't that much better than relying on the claims of others? Thomas, if we're honest, would fit in very well in 2021 with this outlook – with this epistemological stance.

And yet ... there are several problems with Thomas's epistemology here – with where he places his highest confidence in how he can know that something is true.

First of all, in his epistemology, Thomas judges himself too highly.

Thomas may doubt a number of things, but he has complete confidence in himself. Why?

Thomas clearly believes that our senses can deceive us. That seems to be exactly what he believes happened to the ten disciples and to Mary Magdalene. He knows that other people's senses, in and of themselves, can be unreliable. But he seems to have no doubt about his own senses.

And Thomas is not alone in this tendency, is he? When we root our ultimate confidence for knowledge in ourselves – whether in our perceptions, our reasoning, or our intuition – when we root our epistemology ultimately in our own abilities, we often do the same thing Thomas does here: we judge ourselves too highly.

Because every one of us at the same time believes that other people's perceptions, reasoning, and intuitions often lead them in very wrong directions. But we rarely doubt our own perceptions, reasoning, or intuitions.

We have all seen people we know personally totally mis-perceive things going on around them. We have all listened to people explain their reasoning to us, and we could see terrible flaws in their

reasoning that they themselves did not see. We have all known people whose flawed intuitions about what was true led to all sorts of problems in their lives.

And yet most of us rarely consider that we could be making the same mistakes. We so rarely doubt our own perceptions. We so rarely doubt our own reasoning. We so rarely doubt our own intuitions.

There's no rational reason for assuming we are so superior to others. And so, when we place our ultimate confidence for knowledge in our own abilities, one of the first things that goes wrong is that we judge ourselves too highly.

But then, right on the heels of that, one of the second things we often do is that we also judge others too lowly.

Consider Thomas again. Thomas has at least eleven people – ten of the disciples and Mary Magdalene – telling him what they saw on that first Easter Sunday. And he dismisses it. With no evidence against them, and though he has known them personally for years, he judges their testimony as unreliable.

And we often do the same thing, don't we? Particularly when someone disagrees with us, or tells us something we don't want to hear, we automatically, without even thinking about it, begin to disregard their perceptions, their reasoning, and their intuitions. Without a thought we usually assume that we are right, and they must be wrong ... and maybe dumb too.

And before we hold that kind of skepticism up as a virtue, we need to admit that when we do that, we are being remarkably selective.

Because almost everything you and I know, we know by testimony.

Iain Provan points out that one obvious place we see this is history. Anything we know about the past depends on testimony from others. If we want to know about anything that has happened before we were born, we need to rely on the oral or written testimony of those who saw it. Then, if it is distant enough, we often rely on additional testimony from later writers about the original testimony. Then we receive contemporary testimony from current teachers or authors as we ourselves learn about those historical events. Even when such knowledge is supplemented by something like archeology, those archeologists can only interpret what they find by relying on the testimony of other archaeologists on what they have found, so that they can accurately place and interpret the artifacts they discover. From beginning to end, to know anything about history relies on us accepting not the data from our own senses, but the testimony of others. [Provan, in *Biblical History*, 39]

But such reliance is not limited to the field of history, but it is actually fundamental to any field of knowledge. [Provan, in *Behind the Text*, 262]

Think of science. Individual scientists may themselves observe some of the data they take in ... but usually they also work with others and have to rely on their coworkers' testimony about what they observed. On top of that, if they want to interpret their data in light of any other studies or

any previous scientific discoveries, they need to rely on the testimony of the scientists who wrote of those studies and made those discoveries.

And we need not even focus on specialized knowledge to see this. Think of a few things we all just assume. I believe the world is made of atoms. But I've never seen one. I've believed the testimony of others about that fact. I believe Montana exists. But I've never seen it. I have to trust the word of other people that it really is there. I believe that my wife was born in New York, and that she is not a Russian spy who came to America to get close to a powerful man like me. But I never saw her myself before college. To know anything about her life before 2002, I have to rely on the testimony of others.

And though we like to think that pictures and videos can give us more direct access to the truth, with the existence of photoshop and deep fakes, we now find ourselves more and more reliant on the testimony of others to determine whether a picture or video put before us is actually real.

Most of what we know we know by testimony we receive from others. The same was true of Thomas, in the various areas of his life. But here, he irrationally dismisses the testimony of others. And we often do the same – particularly when we don't like what we hear.

And so just as we are quick to judge ourselves too highly, we are also quick to judge others too lowly.

But then third, another problem that emerges when we place our ultimate confidence for knowledge in our own abilities is that we can tend to trust human abilities too blindly.

And we see this in Thomas. We know from the gospels that Jesus predicted his own death and his resurrection from the dead. The disciples failed to grasp it beforehand though. And in that failure, we see them place their reliance on human reasoning and abilities above all else – including the words of Jesus.

In our context this human self-reliance for knowledge often takes its strongest form in those who see humans as the result of naturalistic and materialistic evolution – survival of the fittest.

But if human abilities are truly independent – if they are generated only through natural selection and Darwinian evolution – then what we soon realize is that we actually have less reason to trust our perceptions, reasoning, and intuitions ... not more.

Because if humans are truly independent – if they are simply the result of blind evolution – then natural selection shaped us into what we are today based on the parameters of what would make us most able to survive in order to reproduce.

But several thinkers have pointed out that if humans are optimized for survival and reproduction, it does not necessarily mean that they are also optimized for general truth-seeking.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel has pointed out that if our cognitive abilities as human beings are tuned primarily for reproduction, that does not mean that our reasoning is necessarily adequate for addressing deep metaphysical questions or the problem of ultimate reality. [Nagel, 71-95]

Similarly, cognitive psychologist Donald Hoffman, who has spent decades studying perception, evolution, and the brain, has run natural selection computer simulations that he argues have demonstrated that if our perceptions – the way we experience the data from our senses – are primarily tuned for survival and reproduction by natural selection, then the experience we end up with is not a perception of the world that best matches reality, but instead one that best nudges us towards behaviors that will increase survival for reproduction. He found that cognition shaped by natural selection alone, did not lead to perceptions tuned for accuracy, but for higher rates of reproduction ... and in his simulations those were not the same thing. [Gefter]

And our intuitions have similar problems when taken by themselves. Our emotional drives and internal convictions, if they answer to no higher basis, are only there to help us reproduce – not to help us find truth.

And so we see our third problem with treating our own perceptions, reasoning, or intuitions as ultimate: it puts too much blind trust in independent human abilities.

This is what Thomas's – and our – disordered epistemologies are often like: We place ultimate confidence in our own abilities, and when we do, we judge ourselves too highly, we judge others too lowly, and we trust human abilities too blindly.

And the first thing Jesus does is he hears – he knows – our disordered epistemologies.

What happens after that?

Jesus Accommodates Our Disordered Epistemology

Well, second, and in many ways most shocking in our text, Jesus next accommodates our disordered epistemology.

That is what we see happen here in verses twenty-six and twenty-seven: Jesus appears to Thomas, and he says “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Jesus accommodates Thomas's epistemology ... even though it was so flawed. He certainly didn't have to do that ... but he did. Out of grace, Jesus met Thomas where he was at.

And in some ways, as Jesus points out, Thomas's experience is extraordinary. But in other ways, it is quite ordinary.

It is extraordinary because of what Jesus shows to Thomas: he shows him his own resurrected body, and the wounds he bears. That is something we don't get. That makes Thomas different from all of us here.

And yet, at the same time, Jesus's accommodation of Thomas is not that different from the ways that Jesus graciously accommodates us as well.

We may not see his hands and his side, but Jesus graciously meets us where we are and gives us many things, wherever we may be looking, that point us to him – to such an extent that we have to be willfully hardheaded to ignore it.

Ross Douhat in a recent op-ed put it like this – he writes: “Our supposedly ‘disenchanted’ world remains the kind of world that inspired religious belief in the first place: a miraculously ordered and lawbound system that generates conscious beings who can mysteriously unlock its secrets, who display godlike powers in miniature and also a strong demonic streak, and whose lives are constantly buffeted by hard-to-explain encounters and intimations of transcendence. To be dropped into such a world and not be persistently open to religious possibilities seems much more like prejudice than rationality.”

In a range of ways, God graciously meets us where we are, and accommodates our unwarranted epistemological demands.

And so, when we insist that God reveal himself to our senses – to our perception – he graciously holds before us his creation which points to who he is.

King David put it like this in Psalm 19 – he writes:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

²Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.

³There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.

⁴Their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck writes on this topic, and he puts it like this – he says: “Creation is itself an act of revelation. [...] Every work testifies of its maker [...] every creature manifests something of God’s excellencies and perfections.” [Bavinck, 22]

You only had to go outside this past week and really look around to see the manifestation of God’s excellencies and perfections.

And yet ... it’s also more complicated than that, isn’t it? Because the world around us not only testifies to the excellencies of God ... it also points to the fact that something is wrong in with our relationship to God.

Bavinck writes: “We live in a strange world, a world which presents us with tremendous contrasts. The high and the low, the great and the small, the sublime and the ridiculous, the beautiful and the ugly, the tragic and the comic, the good and the evil, the truth and the lie, these all are heaped up in unfathomable interrelationship. The gravity and the vanity of life seize on us in turn. Now we are prompted to optimism, then to pessimism. Man weeping is constantly giving way to man laughing. The whole world stands in the sign of humor [...] as a laugh and a tear.” [Bavinck, 29]

What does this all point us to? Bavinck explains – he writes: “The deepest cause of the present state of the world [we see] is this: because of the sin of man, God is continually manifesting his wrath and yet, by reason of His own good pleasure, [He] is always revealing his grace also.” [Bavinck, 29]

And so when we demand that God reveal himself to our perceptions, he puts before us a world that in its beauty and goodness testifies to the beauty and goodness of God. But at the same time, we quickly see that some things are not as they should be. And that is how we sense it – as something that is not right, that does not fit with the larger intention of creation. And in this God points to the division that exists between us and him that must be dealt with.

But in revealing himself to us, God not only accommodates those who want to look outwardly and rely on their perceptions. He also accommodates those who want to look inwardly and rely on their intuitions – on the human heart.

Consider, for a moment, what you are. A human being is part of this world ... yet is never fully satisfied with this world. A human, by nature, is a physical creature who instinctively looks to the spiritual realm for fulfillment. A human occupies the temporal world, but longs for eternity in his heart. Our very nature longs for more. Our very nature points to the fact that we were made for more. Our very nature testifies that we were made for God. [Bavinck, 2]

“Man,” Bavinck writes, “is an enigma whose solution can be found only in God.” [Bavinck, 7]

Saint Augustine reflected on this same fact when he noted that as a young man, if he had simply and honestly examined his own heart, then he would have found God as a result. But instead he neglected his heart and what it pointed to. [Augustine, *Confessions*, VI,1,1; Smith]

Jesus graciously accommodates us when we rely ultimately on our perceptions of the world for true knowledge. Jesus graciously accommodates us when we rely ultimately on the intuitions of our hearts for true knowledge.

And then when we demand a rational basis for our faith, once again, God meets us.

And he does that in the testimony that comes to us – the men and women who testify to us about the identity of Jesus.

This may not be the same as what Thomas received, as Jesus himself highlights, but it has some similarities.

We see it in verses thirty and thirty-one. There John writes: “Now 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, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Now, on one level, John is appealing to you to hear him as you would hear anyone who is giving an account of past events. As we have already said, it is impossible to know anything about the past without receiving, and considering the testimony of others who were there, and said “This is

what happened.” In one sense, John is doing ordinary history here, and he appeals to you to hear him.

And though his claims may seem shocking to many, they come with historical credibility.

For as we considered on Easter morning, and as Pastor Rayburn discussed last Sunday evening, something happened in the days that followed the crucifixion of Jesus. A group of disciples who were frightened and confused suddenly became courageous and confident. A group of Jews who did not believe in any sort of mid-history resurrection suddenly began claiming that the mid-history resurrection of Jesus was the turning point of human history. A group of strictly monotheists suddenly began proclaiming that their human leader was also God. A group that had seen their leader publicly put to death suddenly so boldly believed that he had risen from the dead, that they were willing to die for their confession of that fact. And history has been able to offer no convincing explanation for this radical transformation in Jesus’s followers, besides the explanation those followers gave themselves: that Jesus Christ had indeed risen from the dead, and they had seen him.

And so, whether by the world around us, by the world within us, or by the testimony of John and the world of history, God accommodates even our disordered epistemological demands, and he reveals himself to us by them.

Jesus Confronts Our Disordered Epistemology

But he doesn’t stop there. Because third, we see that Jesus not only accommodates our disordered epistemology, but he also confronts it.

And he does this with his words.

In verse twenty-six Jesus appears. And then in verse twenty-seven he says to Thomas “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Now, we need to be careful not to move over these words too quickly and miss their significance. We heard Thomas’s words in verse twenty-five, and so we’re not surprised to hear Jesus answer them in verse twenty-seven. But Thomas would have been. Because Jesus wasn’t there when Thomas spoke those words. Or, at least, Thomas *thought* that Jesus wasn’t there.

Jesus’s knowledge of Thomas’s words tells Thomas that he is dealing not only with a resurrected man, but with something more. He is dealing with someone who knows what Thomas says even when not actually present. Or, maybe more startling, he is actually dealing with someone who can be truly present even when he is not physically present. [Carson, 657]

Leon Morris writes that while the sight of Jesus had a striking effect on Thomas, “It is possible that it was the words of Jesus more than anything which brought conviction, for they showed that Jesus was perfectly aware of what Thomas had laid down as his demands. How did [Jesus] come to this knowledge unless He was there, unseen?” [Morris, 853]

By Jesus's words, Thomas knew that Jesus was not only a resurrected man, but something more than that.

And suddenly everything begins to flip. And Thomas's world turns upside down.

Suddenly Thomas realizes that while he had thought it was he who was passing judgment on Jesus, it was in fact Jesus who was passing judgment on him.

And this kind of reversal happens a few times in John's gospel. And often it is in connection with Jesus revealing his knowledge of others – knowledge that goes beyond the human level.

And so, in chapter one of John's gospel Philip goes to get Nathanael. He tells Nathanael that they have found the Messiah. Nathaniel is skeptical when he hears about Jesus. He himself passes judgment on Jesus and gives his evaluation: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" he asks. But still, he goes to meet Jesus. And when he gets to him Jesus says: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael is confused and asks, "How do you know me?" Jesus answers him, saying: "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." We don't know what Jesus is speaking about there, but clearly Nathanael did. Because he responds by declaring "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Nathaniel thought he was coming to evaluate Jesus, and he quickly discovered that Jesus was the one who was supernaturally evaluating him.

A few chapters later Jesus speaks to the woman at the well. At first, she is asking him questions, trying to evaluate him and his intentions. But by the end of the conversation, she is running to get her fellow villagers, telling them that Jesus may just be the Christ. And the basis for why she believes this is summed up in her plea – she says to them: "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did."

And in the same way, as Thomas tries to act as judge over Jesus, Jesus turns things upside down, and Thomas realizes that it is Jesus who is supernaturally evaluating him. And he casts aside his previous demands and turns to Jesus himself.

And Jesus confronts us in the same way.

As we make our list of demands of God before we will accept his truth and follow his commands – as we stand in judgment and try to evaluate God – God himself is looking at us and evaluating us. He sees how stubborn our hearts are. He sees how willfully blind we can choose to be. He sees the resistance to him that is in our heart. And even as he accommodates our demands and reveals himself in countless ways to us, he calls on us through his Word to stop pretending as if we are in the judgment seat over him, and to acknowledge instead that he is judge over us, and we must let go of our absurd demands, and turn to him instead.

After accommodating our disordered epistemology, Jesus confronts it.

Jesus Reorders Our Epistemology

From there, fourth and finally, Jesus reorders our epistemology. Because when we see Jesus for who he is, we realize that his word, and not our own abilities, must be our ultimate source of knowledge.

That is what we see happen in Thomas. Thomas begins with disordered epistemological demands – disordered demands for what he believes. He places inordinate confidence in himself, and his perceptions, and abilities.

Jesus knows this. Jesus accommodates this. And then Jesus confronts it. But he doesn't ask Thomas to reject his old way of knowing and replace it with nothing. Instead he calls on Thomas to reorder what he trusts for knowledge of the truth.

Thomas's ultimate confidence cannot be in himself, but it must be in the word of Jesus. And it is that reordering that brings Thomas's transformation to completion, and his confession to its great height.

Thomas looks at Jesus and confesses "My Lord and my God!"

We should note that this confession of Jesus's identity cannot be rooted primarily in seeing Jesus's resurrected body. God could, after all, raise any man from the dead if he wanted to. No, seeing was a first step. But then Thomas put seeing aside, and he placed his highest confidence not in the sight of his eyes, but in the words of Jesus. Jesus's words in verse twenty-seven confirmed that Thomas was dealing with more than a man. And then, with that knowledge, Thomas heard, in a new way, the many things that Jesus had said to him before. And placing his ultimate trust now in Jesus's words, he saw Jesus for who he really was, and he confessed "My Lord and my God!" [Wright, *Resurrection*, 22]

And Jesus seeks the same transformation in us. It is not that our perception, and our reason, and our intuitions are *no* grounds for knowledge. That is not what Jesus teaches us. But instead he teaches that they are lesser, and dependent ways of knowing. Though our perceptions, our reasoning, and our intuitions can all be flawed because of the fall, we can have some level of confidence in each of them because each was made by a God who loves truth ... and a God who made us in his image.

And so we should have some level of confidence in each of those things. But our ultimate confidence ... our ultimate source of knowledge ... the foundation of our epistemology – of how we know what we know – must be the word of Jesus. For he is our Lord and our God. He is our Maker and our King. And he sees all and knows all. He sits in judgment on us, not we on him.

And though knowledge of that – knowledge of Jesus's judgment and our sin and obstinacy – may lead us to want to flee from Jesus out of fear, the story of Thomas urges us to respond differently. For despite his sin and hardheartedness, with Jesus Thomas found grace. With Jesus Thomas found a patient and gentle Lord. With Jesus Thomas found forgiveness for his slowness to believe. And we will find the same – if we admit our failures, confess our faith in Christ, and cling to him in hope.

This is the truth that John has been writing for us to receive. This is what John most wants us to know. Jesus is our Lord. Jesus is our God. Jesus is the ultimate source of all true knowledge. And Jesus spoke many words and gave many signs to teach us that this is so. And John has written them down for us – so that you might hear his testimony.

These things, he explains, “are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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