

“Where is the Proof?”
John 20:24-29

April 8, 2018

2nd Sunday of Easter

Proof is something very important in our society. If police arrest you and accuse you of breaking the law, then they have to show proof for that. If they can't show proof, then you go free. If you want to buy a house or a car, you have to show proof that you can afford to pay the monthly payments or the bank will not give the loan. If you say something outrageous and unbelievable, then you have to show proof to back it up or it can be dismissed as being untrue. For example, if you said that a UFO landed near your house and that you spoke to little green men, then people would rightly say, “Where is your proof?” And if you said that your friend who was dead and buried is suddenly now alive, people would naturally say, “Where is the proof?”

Jesus' disciples experienced the same demand for proof on the evening of that first Easter many years ago. They were very sad that Jesus had died. They were also very afraid that the Jewish leaders who had arrested and killed Jesus would also seek to arrest and kill them. So, they huddled together in a room with the doors locked, trembling with fear.

And, then, all of a sudden, Jesus appeared and stood before them. The disciples were afraid. They didn't know what to believe -- maybe they were imagining this or were dreaming. Maybe it was a ghost. Then Jesus showed them proof -- His hands with nail holes in them and his pierced side. And the disciples believed that it was truly Jesus physically alive standing before them. They were overjoyed.

But one disciple was not with them that evening. His name was Thomas. When the other disciples came to him and said, “We have seen the Lord. He is alive again,” he refused to believe. He said, “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 it.”

How often we criticize or ridicule Thomas. Because of him, we call anyone who refuses to believe something a “Doubting Thomas”. Yet he was only doing what most of us would have done in his place. He was demanding proof. Many people today have the exact same doubts about Jesus and the Easter message. How do we know Jesus truly arose from the dead? Some think the disciples were devious. They stole the body of Jesus and then proclaimed that He had risen from the dead. Those who are sympathetic to the disciples merely think that their grief was so strong and they wanted to see Jesus so much that they began to hallucinate. Some even think that Jesus never really died on the cross, but that he merely passed out and was revived in the cool air of the tomb. This may be an absurd theory, but the question remains. Where is the proof?

Why do we naturally doubt and demand proof? All doubting occurs because of sin. In fact, doubt was the first sin. God told Adam and Eve, “Don't eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Later, Satan said, “Did God really say that?” And Eve began to doubt. She doubted God's command. She doubted whether God was giving her all good things. And that doubt led to the further sin of eating the forbidden fruit.

Sin infected all people who followed Adam and Eve in the same way: doubt what God has said, promised, and done and, instead, let senses, logic, and reason decide what is true. The disciples were sinners in that way. Jesus clearly promised on several occasions that He would die for their sins and rise from the dead on the third day. When Jesus died and rose again, they did not remember nor believe Jesus' promise. Logic said that Jesus must still be dead. Common sense would refute any thought of resurrection. Their senses told them, therefore, that this must be a ghost standing in front of them.

We are sinners in the same way. God's promises are not enough for us. When we face a crisis, we forget about His clear word. We want proof. And, when proof is lacking, we trust our reason, our senses, our logic, and what makes sense to us. God says He loves us. We want to see proof - some miracle - or we doubt. God says He is with us. We want proof - we want to feel that presence - or we doubt. God says He raised Jesus from the dead. We want proof - we want to see Jesus standing before us - or we doubt.

Thomas wanted something to confirm what his fellow disciples had told him and he received it. But what exactly changed Thomas' doubt into faith, his unbelief into belief? It might not be what you think. A week later, Jesus appeared again to His disciples and Thomas was there with them. Jesus spoke directly to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Did Thomas touch Jesus' hand or His side? We always assume that he did, but the Bible does not actually say that did. Rather, it simply says that Thomas heard Jesus' words, believed, and confessed, "My Lord and my God."

Thomas demanded the right to touch Jesus for proof, but apparently, He never did that. Thomas heard Jesus' words and His words overcame the doubt and created faith. That is the way for us today. It would not be difficult to give a credible defense of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, based on such indisputable facts such as the emptiness of the tomb on that first Easter and the incredibly changed behavior of the disciples following that day. However, I cannot give you irrefutable proof that Jesus is alive. And I don't think that Jesus will appear and stand before us. (He could but I don't think He will.)

How, then, are our doubts to be overcome? As with Thomas, it His Word and His Word alone which overcomes our doubt. His Word is recorded in the Bible. When we read it or hear it in church or Bible class, the Holy Spirit is at work in us. The Holy Spirit - not proof, not logic, not reasoning - convinces us that what is said there is true. We are able to believe that Jesus died on the cross, not simply as an historical fact, but in the place of us and as the punishment for our sins and that we receive His forgiveness because of it. We are able to believe that Jesus rose from the dead to life again, not simply as a miraculous event, but in order to allow us to conquer death and live forever. We believe all of this, not because we decided to believe, not because it all makes sense, or not because we have proof, but because the Holy Spirit has caused a miracle to happen in our hearts which is as great as the resurrection of Jesus from physical death to life: He has resurrected our hearts from the death of sin and unbelief to the spiritual life of faith in His promises of forgiveness and everlasting life.

Jesus knows that this is not easy for us, compared with the experience of His first disciples. Jesus says to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." He heard and saw Jesus. This did not cause him to believe but, rather, confirmed the faith which the Holy Spirit had given him. You receive that same confirmation here, too.

Do you want to hear Jesus? You can. Jesus gave to His disciples and those who would follow them the unique authority to forgive sins. He said, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." He also said, "He who hears you, hears me." You can hear Jesus through the voice of an ordinary human being. When you hear your pastor speak by Jesus' authority to forgive your sins, you are hearing the voice of Jesus. That confirms and strengthens your faith.

Do you want to see Jesus? You can. Jesus appears before us in our church on a regular basis. Granted, it is not in the same way that He appeared on that first Easter. Nevertheless, it is no less real. He comes to us in simple bread and ordinary wine. In the Lord's Supper, He says, "Take, eat; this is My body. Take, drink; this is my blood." You can see, not merely a representation or symbol for Jesus in this sacrament, but you actually see, touch, and taste the Lord Jesus Christ physically present in the bread and the wine. That confirms and strengthens your faith.

There is a popular slogan which says, "Seeing is believing." That doesn't work here though. There is nothing that you can physically see with your eyes that will cause you to believe in Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection for you. However, just the opposite is true: "Believing is seeing." When Jesus speaks to us in His Word and the Holy Spirit works faith in us, then we will see Jesus all over the place -- in the Bible, at our altar, and in the bread and the wine. If Jesus were standing before us today, He might say, "Hear me in the Absolution. See me in the bread and the wine. Stop doubting and believe." To which we, like Thomas, could only exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" "Blessed are you," says Jesus. And blessed we are now, in every crisis we face, at our deaths, and for all eternity. There's the proof. Amen