

“Believing”

Lent 2019 - “With All Your Heart” – part #7

John 20:19-31

Have you heard of Ripley’s “Believe It or Not?” In the early 1900’s, Robert Ripley, a cartoonist, traveled the world over and recorded many strange statistics and events. Eventually he published several books, hosted radio shows, and opened “Odditoriums” around the world – museums filled with curious things he had found. Today, “Ripley’s Believe It Or Not” has sold millions of copies.

Here is just one curious story from ripleys.com:

On June 4th, 1923, Frank Hayes, a long-time horse trainer and jockey, won his first and only race, despite being dead. He was riding “Sweet Kiss,” a long shot at 20-1 odds to win. At some point during the race, Hayes suffered a fatal heart attack, but he never fell off his horse, winning by a head. In fact, no one seemed to notice that Frank had died until the owners went down to the track to congratulate him.¹ Can you believe that?

Ripley coined the phrase “Believe It Or Not.” Most of us would doubt the story of Frank Hayes unless we had seen it ourselves. And therein lies the point: we can choose to believe the story is true, or not.

Now believing the story of Frank Hayes probably won’t have any impact on your life. However, what you choose to believe about the resurrection of Jesus will have a profound impact on your life, whatever you decide.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was even incredible to those who saw the empty tomb with their own eyes. Mary Magdalene did not believe until she saw Jesus in the garden. The disciples did not believe until Jesus appeared to them in

¹ <https://www.ripleys.com/weird-news/frank-hayes/>

a locked room. And Thomas? Well, he needed more than a story. He wanted to touch the scars on Jesus' body before he would accept the resurrection as fact.

Generally speaking, dead men don't win horse races...usually...and they don't inspire hope in a group of 1st century fishermen. In Thomas' mind, the only thing he knew was that Jesus had been crucified. Put yourself in Thomas' shoes. When someone whom you love dies, eventually in the process of grief, you come to accept their death as fact. Three days after the funeral, if anyone came to you saying the deceased had returned, you would be shocked and insulted.

And yet, this is exactly what Thomas experienced. These disciples were his best friends. They wouldn't joke about this. Ironically, these same disciples refused to believe the women who first reported to them that the tomb was empty and Jesus was alive! (Luke 24:11; Mark 16:11) Now, they have a similar problem trying to convince Thomas of the truth.

Tradition has not been kind to Thomas. It is from this scripture that we have coined the phrase “Doubting Thomas.” Have you ever been called that? It seems a little insulting, and I submit to you that it is not at all warranted.

You and I would have been similarly skeptical to believe that Jesus was resurrected. Would it not be fair to ask for proof? Even though it seems strange, none of you asked me for proof that Frank Hayes really did win a horse race while dead, but you could ask me for it. So I believe it was completely fair for Thomas to request to see Jesus himself.

We don't know why Thomas missed the first appearance. Maybe he was scared or grieving, or maybe the disciples had just sent him out for sandwiches... OK, probably not that. But for a whole week, Thomas berated himself for not being there. For a whole week, his friends hounded him with this incredible

news, "Jesus is alive!" Seven days to wonder, "What if?" That's a long time. No wonder Thomas asked for proof.

This is the grace given to Thomas: Jesus showed up, revealing himself as requested. Jesus knew, without being told, exactly what Thomas needed. "Touch my hands, touch my side. See my scars." And then Jesus spoke these words to him: "Stop doubting and believe." (John 20:27)

I want to make something very clear this morning. It is normal to doubt. Doubt is actually a sign of healthy discernment, if, and only if, your doubt leads you to ponder, research, and ask good questions. Doubt is only bad if it leads you to despair, pessimism, cynicism, and rejection of the truth. This world has enough cynics already, don't you agree?

Maybe "Doubting Thomas" is a bad name for him. Maybe we should call him "Discerning Thomas." Better yet, "Believing Thomas." The scripture tells us that when Jesus finally appeared to him, Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" Standing before the Lord Jesus Christ, Thomas knew with every fiber of his being that this was indeed the Risen Savior, the Son of God, and the One whom he worshipped. To say to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" is the fullest, most adequate Christological confession anyone can make. Thomas had a complete 180-degree turnaround.

I don't know what you believe in regard to Jesus. Maybe you do think the Bible is true, and you live your life accordingly. Maybe you have doubts about Christianity. The truth is, we do not have the opportunity to see Jesus the same way Thomas did. Perhaps that is why many people today do not believe in Jesus. I don't mean "believe", as in, historically, 2000 years ago, a man named Jesus

lived in Palestine, was crucified, and a short while later, his disciples claimed that he was alive. The historical evidence for Jesus is about as good as it can be.

No, when I say, “believe in Jesus,” I mean, trust him, the way you sat down on the pews this morning trusting unconsciously that they would hold your weight. Trusting in Jesus is like going bungee jumping, trusting the rope not to break; trusting an airplane not to crash when you fly. Trusting a good friend to keep a secret until the right time comes to go public. Deep trusting and believing means saying to Jesus, “My Lord and my God! I give you my whole life as a sacrifice of praise and worship.” In the words of Ripley, it’s our choice to “believe it or not.”

People believe in all sorts of stuff. We live in a day and age where information, real and fake, is accessible in the blink of an eye, the touch of a screen or button. We get lulled into believing things without asking the important “W” words – who, what, where, when, why, how and so what? You can believe anything you want, or not. But simply believing in something does not make it true. I can believe that whacking you over the head with a 2-by-4 will bring you eternal bliss and happiness, but I seriously doubt you will accept that. For us to know something is true, we need to follow Thomas’ example. We need to ask, “Where is the evidence to justify that belief?” In the case of Jesus, there are at least two sources.

First, there are the witnesses who saw him. The very reason we have the Bible, God’s Word, is because those who saw Jesus alive had their stories recorded. Acts 1:3 states that Jesus, “presented himself to them with many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a span of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” Paul further testifies in 1 Corinthians

15:3-8 that Jesus appeared to Peter, to the disciples, to 500 witnesses, and then, to Paul himself. In other words, there is no shortage of people who saw Jesus and share their testimony with us, even now, hundreds of years later.

But, perhaps that’s not enough for you. Second, there is the life-changing evidence of the Holy Spirit working in those who follow Jesus. One example is standing before you this morning. My life is completely different than it was without Christ. Others are sitting among you in the pews, serving breakfast, singing and playing music, ready to serve you the sacraments. All you need to do is turn and ask them, “What has believing in Jesus done for your life?”

I suspect that we will never have the opportunity to see Jesus the way that Thomas did. And that’s OK. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29) Seeing and believing are different, and one is not dependent on the other. But the fact remains that we can see Jesus with our hearts. We can call him Lord and God. We can believe that he died to save us, that he truly rose again, and that he offers all of us the gift of eternal life if we believe in him, love him, and serve him. In fact, the Bible seems to indicate that greater blessing is given to those who believe without seeing. Listen to 1 Peter 1:8 – “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and rejoice with an inexpressible and glorious joy.”

Even though I can’t play you a news report of Jesus’ resurrection, you can know the joy that Thomas did, right here and now. In a moment we will receive Communion, and you can meet Jesus. You can call him Lord, Master, Savior, and my God.

John 20 concludes, “These [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his

name." (John 20:31) Today you have heard the testimony, the story, the incredible truth that Jesus is alive. Will you believe it, or not? My sincere hope is that you do believe it, and because of that choice, you will have life in the name of Jesus Christ, the Resurrected and Living Son of God.