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Sermon Title: Doubt or Confirm?

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Text: [John 20:19-31](#)

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It has been just a week since we gathered in this place to sing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” and to shout, “Christ is risen—He is risen indeed!” My question for you this morning, then, is, “If he has risen, have you seen him?” Was the risen Christ at the grocery store when you stopped in for bread and milk or at the hardware store when you stopped in to get the parts to fix the toilet? Was he at Starbucks when you stopped by for your coffee? I’m assuming that no one spotted him since I got no emails. I saw no Facebook posts that you had seen the risen Christ. In this age of social media, I’m assuming I would have heard something by now had you encountered him.

On the other hand, had you posted or emailed that you had spotted Jesus out running around, there would be enough doubt to go around, and we likely would be having a different discussion about these visions that you are having. As much as I like you, I’d need something more than your word if you tell me that you saw Jesus while getting your coffee or groceries or toilet parts or a latte.

Today, we hear that the disciples were hiding together on Easter afternoon in a house where they had fled after the crucifixion, terrified of what might come. They, too, had heard stories that he had risen, but rumors weren't as solid as the locked door between them and the outside world. Then, suddenly, Jesus was among them. He spoke to them and gave them his peace. He breathed on them and sent them out of their locked room into the world to serve as his witnesses.

A week later, we are here, listening as Thomas has his say also a week after the resurrection. He wasn't there when Jesus made his first appearance to the hiding group of disciples behind the bolted door. The others told Thomas all about seeing the Lord, but Thomas said that he wouldn't believe it until he'd touched Jesus' wounds for himself. “But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe’” (John 20:25b).

Thomas gets the name of the “doubter” because of one little sentence, but it could have applied to any of them. We don’t get a sense that any of the disciples believed the women when they returned from the tomb. We certainly know that Peter and John did not believe them because they rushed to the tomb on that Easter morning to see for themselves. The scripture says that they, like the women, also found the tomb empty and left wondering what it might mean. It seems to me that we could lump all the disciples into the doubting camp. In fact, that even has a better ring to it—the “doubting disciples.”

All of this made me wonder what else we know about Thomas. There isn't much about him in the gospels. In fact, aside from his name appearing in the lists of disciples, there are only two other instances where Thomas is identified by name, both in the Gospel of John. One is when Jesus insists on going to Judea after the death of Lazarus. The disciples know this is not a smart move. The last time Jesus went to Judea, the Jews tried to stone him. But Jesus is determined to go. And Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). This doesn't sound like a doubting Thomas. This is a Thomas of courage and conviction.

Thomas appears again in John 14. Now, this is more of the questioning Thomas. Jesus is telling the disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them in his Father's house and that they already know the way. "Thomas says to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?'" (John 14:5). Jesus answers him with, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Thomas has been told by Jesus himself that by seeing Jesus he has seen God. So, when the disciples tell him three days after the crucifixion that they have seen Jesus alive, is it any wonder he wants to see for himself? He knows what seeing Jesus means. Seeing Jesus means seeing God. Thomas is being faithful to Jesus and is using both his heart and his head. Seeing makes things more real. Seeing one's handprints on something allows us to draw closer to them.

If you've been to Smoky Mountain National Park, you may have visited the Cade's Cove area of the park, a settlement dating to the early 1800s. There are homes and churches that are preserved on this 11-mile loop in a gorgeous valley between two mountains. The Primitive Baptist Church in Cade's Cove has an interpretive program about the church from a park ranger. The ranger recounted that the church was established in 1827, and the church in which we sat was built in 1887. At one point during the program, the ranger pointed to the ceiling and asked if we could see anything out of the ordinary in the large boards running the length of the church. "Can you see the fingerprints?" he asked. As I looked, I could see handprints on the edge of every board. Some clearly were the handprints of adults, others were small—the hands of children.

The ranger explained that the wood had not been dried properly and would have been covered with sap. As the workers and helpers got the sap on their hands, their prints were left on every piece of wood they touched. From the moment he pointed out these boards, I felt an instant connection with those people whose handprints were just a few feet above my head. I could imagine them sawing and carrying the lumber, stacking it, and then handing it to those who were putting the ceiling into place. I did not doubt

for a moment that this church had been built, for I was sitting in it, but being able to see the handprints made 137 years ago by the people who built this church made them come alive for me.

Thomas and the other doubting disciples wanted confirmation of what had happened in their midst. If they could see handprints, their connection would be stronger—strengthened for the mission that was before them. It's when they can touch or at least are offered to touch, that they are empowered for what lies before them. I was reminded of the phrase "TRUST AND VERIFY," which was an old Russian proverb but became internationally known when Ronald Reagan used it on several occasions in the context of nuclear disarmament discussions with the Soviet Union.¹

When Thomas was with the rest of the group a week after the resurrection, where we find ourselves today, Jesus appears to them again, this time speaking directly to Thomas, "Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (John 20:27-28).

Doubt is not a denial of faith. It's one way of faith among many. The risen Lord knew that those he would commission for service in the world come with different needs, and he is more than willing to meet them where they are. In the end, Thomas is the only disciple in the Gospel of John to say to Jesus with confidence, "My Lord and my God!"

While at TCU, I took a class on religion in the fine arts. One of the paintings we studied was Caravaggio's *"The Incredulity of Thomas"* painted in about 1600. In it, Thomas is leaning over looking intently at Jesus' wounds. I remember my professor, Ken Lawrence, being so passionate about his subject matter, leaning over just as Thomas is leaning, striking this same pose in the front of the classroom. What is especially striking to me and to Lawrence is that in this painting, Jesus is not looking at Thomas accusingly. He has no expression on his face that says, "There! Are you finally satisfied? What does it take to convince you?" Rather, Jesus is looking down at Thomas and guiding his hand, looking almost as if he might be praying—praying that Thomas might be a blessing to many.

It's true that Jesus asks for faith, but he does not ask for blind faith. Jesus wants us to have open-eyed faith. Thomas did not just believe what he saw. Thomas also believed what he did not see. Thomas believed that Jesus was not only alive but also was God. The other disciples rejoice at seeing Jesus alive, but Thomas is the only one who proclaims, "My Lord and my God!"²

Thomas is both the one who sees and believes that Jesus has risen. He is the one who has not seen but believes beyond seeing that Jesus is Lord. The Christian faith will always face challenges from those who claim it will not stand up to scrutiny. John says as much in the sentences right after this story of Thomas, when he says, "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust,_but_verify

² Idea for Thomas' profession of faith as a connection to blessing of the unseen from The Rev. Dr. Katharine Hinman, Young Leaders Series I: The Faith of the Doubter, May 01, 2011, www.day1.org.

book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing, you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). Clearly, John knows that, like Thomas, we are going to need evidence for our faith. And he provides it.

In these days in which we live with artificial intelligence seemingly taking over every aspect of our lives, we seem to uncritically accept everything that we read or see as truth without asking for validation. While I hesitate to say this out loud, I asked ChatGPT—one of the artificial intelligence providers—to “write an opening paragraph to a sermon on doubting Thomas.” The result was this:

Dear beloved congregation, Today, we gather in the light of our shared faith, drawn together by the resonance of Thomas' doubt—an echo of our own uncertainties, fears, and moments of questioning. In the Gospel, Thomas stands as a poignant figure, often labeled "Doubting Thomas" for his initial skepticism in the resurrection. Yet, beyond his doubt lies a profound journey of faith and encounter, one that speaks to the depths of our own struggles and the transformative power of encountering the risen Christ. As we delve into the story of Doubting Thomas, let us explore the richness of doubt, the courage to question, and the unwavering love that invites us into deeper communion with our Savior.³

End of AI—back to me. It's not bad, but it's not me. We must, like Thomas, scrutinize more carefully what we believe. Perhaps it is time to let Thomas be our guide, to not be afraid to ask questions or seek evidence—God can stand up to it—but also to not be afraid to accept the amazing reality that is the resurrection. Perhaps it is time to let Thomas be our guide, to see with open-eyed faith the confirmation of Jesus' life AND the revelation that he is our Lord and our God.

Where do you see the handprints of Jesus today? Where do you see evidence that He has risen? You shouted it last week. What makes Jesus come alive for you? We sit in this space a week after Easter, and there are no sap-preserved handprints on this ceiling or at this table. It may be too easy to put Easter away for another year. We go through our days and fail to notice God's handprints on our lives and on the lives of others.

If the events of Easter give meaning to your faith, it is up to you to put your faith into action. Allow other people to see Jesus in you and look to see Jesus in others. The promise of this text is that Jesus cannot be stopped by our locked doors or by us wanting confirmation. Jesus comes to us as he came to the first disciples, in our fear, pain, doubt, and confusion. He comes speaking peace, breathing into our anxious lives the breath of the Holy Spirit.

What's more, he keeps showing up. As he came back a week later for Thomas, Jesus keeps coming back week after week among his gathered disciples—us—in the word, the bread, and the cup—not wanting anyone of us to miss out on the life and peace he gives. And he keeps sending us out of our safe, locked rooms, into a world that, like us, so desperately needs his gifts of life and peace. So maybe, just maybe,

³ <https://chat.openai.com/>

the risen Christ was at the grocery this week or the hardware store or at Starbucks, someone doing something that has the hands of Christ in it. When Christ is in you, you will see Christ in others. If you see him, you have my permission to let me know that you have seen the risen Christ walking among you. You'll be able to proclaim throughout the year that "Christ is risen—He is risen indeed."