

Unless I See

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

John 20: 24-29



24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus^[a]), 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.”

How many of you have ever been to the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN? It's not a place you can stay at, now, but back in the 1960's it was a legitimate temporary residence for road warriors in need of a comfortable bed and a shower. My family and I visited the Lorraine Motel awhile back, not because we were tired from traveling, but because we wanted to see the place where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. died. When I think about it now, it was kind of macabre to want to see the place where someone was

assassinated, but we were on a tour of civil rights and civil war sites of the South, and the Lorraine certainly fit the bill.

If you haven't been to the Lorraine Motel, it has been turned into a civil rights museum. There are burnt out Greyhound buses, and walls of water blasting at plexiglass so that you can see the effects of/ the force of the waters aimed at many African American people in the South. There are photographs of lynchings and a recreation of the Woolworth's lunch counter where young black protesters had cigarettes put out in their hair while they waited for a ham and cheese sandwich that wasn't going to appear. As you wind through the museum you at last find yourself in what appears to be a dead end. It is actually, the corridor leading to the last room Martin Luther King slept in. The walls are cut away and everything in the room is exactly as it was 50 years ago on the day he was shot. You can hear the voices of his friends talking and joking with him. Just a bunch of guys who've been traveling together for too long, getting ready to go to work. There is a towel wadded up on the side of a bed. Clothes laid out. Toiletry items on the dresser.

And then you walk through a door out onto a balcony, and you see how close the building next door is. You see the window a gun pointed out of. You see the place where Martin fell. You experience, in a vicarious way, what it was like to be there on that April 4, 1968. It is overwhelming to the senses, even though it is very quiet. Even though you know it happened a long time ago. Even though you've seen the pictures and heard the

interviews with Rev. Abernathy and Rev. Jackson, being there is something different. Something...transforming.

Mary had met Jesus in the garden by the tomb.

Peter had run to see the linens left behind. He had seen the rock rolled away.

The other disciples had encountered Jesus in the upper room. He had appeared before them, sauntering through a door.

Somehow, Thomas gets pegged as a *doubter*! Because he wants at least a taste of what the others had presented to them, Thomas receives a reputation that has been the fodder of pejorative preachers since at least 1868 when the term “Doubting Thomas” first entered into print. It has been used as a derogatory descriptor. It has been used to describe someone who doesn’t have the same amount of faith as you (in fact, much less!). It is a phrase used to devalue someone who hasn’t stepped out onto the balcony and seen what I’ve seen...which is strange, because that isn’t how Jesus treated Thomas at all.

A week later Jesus’ 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!”

I think we latch onto the “doubter” epithet so that we don’t have to describe what we’ve seen, either because we’re embarrassed or, overwhelmed or, can’t find the words to do justice to our experience. If we dismiss someone

as a “doubter” we don’t have to try and explain the holes in the hands and side. We don’t have to try and describe what it felt like to discover an empty tomb or meet someone on the road who opened our eyes in new ways to the possibility of resurrection.

At BCC we are very good at acting on our faith. I am moved by the acts of caring that I witness here. The cards that are sent. The conversations that take place. The prayers that are lifted up. The rides that are given. The little “thinking of you” gifts that are bestowed. I believe the caring springs forth from faith...but I don’t know that for sure. Nobody has said outright, “I do this because this is what Jesus did for me.” I haven’t heard anyone proclaim, “I offer you these gifts in thanksgiving for the gifts I receive each day from Jesus.” Who knows, we might just be a pocket of really nice people...or we could be people who are really moved by Jesus’ spirit dwelling among us. We may be the folks who gush, “*We have seen the Lord!*” But I am here to tell you, that there folks who have all the desire and awe that Thomas had, who respond to our experience with, “*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.*” And they need our deeds as well as our words. And I wouldn’t call them “doubters.” I would call them, “inexperienced.”

- We have young people in our church who are “inexperienced” with the life changing relationship we’ve come to know. They have been taught to rely on technology and “wisdom.” They don’t want to look

stupid in front of their peers for believing in an old story about a guy in a tomb; they call out, “Unless I see...”

- We have folks in our community who are “inexperienced,” in the open and affirming embrace that we have come to understand. They are afraid of being rejected or hurt by another Christian community because of the color of their skin, or who they love, or how they identify their gender, or how much money they have in their pockets, or what their particular abilities are, or... They quietly whisper, “Unless I see...”
- We have people in surrounding communities who are “Inexperienced” with the kind of *caring for one another* spirit that we have encountered. They believe that unless they do it themselves, they are losers...but they can't do it alone...and they are growing weary, flailing in the rising waters of life. They say to themselves, “Unless I see...”

But we tend to dismiss the “*unless I see*”ers, as “doubters.” We say, “if you only believe.” We shift in our pews and mutter, “if you only have faith.” Truth is, most of *us* came by our faith by someone taking our hand and gently putting it into the holes in Jesus’ hands and side...with love, with compassion. With a desire to pass on the knowledge. With a passion for sharing the wonder of his presence. At some point in our faith journey most of us have said, “unless I see” and we’ve been seeing for so long we forgot that we needed some help opening our eyes! We forgot that we needed a *caring someone* to guide us into this relationship. I remember a Sunday school teacher, Olive Pease from West Springfield, MA taking my hands and teaching me that Jesus loved me no matter what. She taught with her

kind deeds, and she taught with words I could understand. That simple lesson made all the difference in the world to me. Perhaps we can be those caring “someones.”

Think about why you believe.

What it is about Jesus that makes him a reality you rely on?

What have you seen or heard or experienced of Jesus, that caused you to cry out (loud or in your heart) “*My Lord and my God!*”? How would you describe it in deeds and words?

When you have the answers to those questions, think about how Jesus came with peace to share his answer with Thomas. Think about how Jesus did not come condemning, but seeking to illuminate, seeking to bring Thomas into the fold of God’s love and understanding...and do likewise.

This past week we recognized the 50 year anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. The New York Times ran articles and editorials on the impact of Dr. King’s ministry, movement, and assassination. Television networks gathered around the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN to show us where he died so tragically. In between the high profile articles, I could hear the voices of people of color in our community saying, “yeah yeah. You’re paying attention to Dr. King’s issues today; the need for racial equality, livable wages for all, an end to violence against people of color, and end to war that is propped up on the backs of poor people; but *unless I see you still interested in that stuff tomorrow, I will not believe you really care.*

As always, we have a choice. We can write these folks off as “doubting Thomas's”. We can dismiss them because we are aware of the on going work and ministries we're involved with...orrr, we can follow the lead of our Savior.

Perhaps they are inexperienced.

Perhaps we have not reached out and taken them by the hand in peace, and shown them what we've seen...or told them what we know.

Perhaps there is another way of sharing our faith that will elicit a “my Lord! My God!” exclamation of hope.

Let's respond with compassion to those who wish to see, in Jesus' name.
Amen.