

15 April 2012  
John 20:19-31

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## Belief and Life

When I was an associate pastor, inevitably I was chosen to preach on the Sunday following Easter. Though I didn't look back at ALL my post-Easter sermons, I figure I've worked with poor, maligned Thomas at least ten times. I am guessing that we all have heard this gospel lesson at least once. How many ways can we hear that we should be more like those who can believe without seeing, than to be "doubting Thomases"?

I am sure there are any number of preachers out there today urging their congregations to just Believe! And their lives will change. If that is the meat of their message sadly it falls short. It's more complicated than that.

To focus solely on belief is like showing someone a completed Rubik's cube – or one of those annoying tavern puzzles – messing it all up and saying "You can do that." Right. Then what? Belief is only part of the message in this chapter from John. The whole of this gospel shows us who Jesus is and our connection to him. And is summed up in our final verse: "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."

Belief gives us life. Life gives us belief. What do I mean by this? I'll start with Life, because that is easier. Our lives are made up of series of experiences. These experiences teach us to believe certain things – from the simple lessons we learn as children, to bigger, sometimes more costly lessons we learn as adults.

I remember watching an early life lesson play out for my brother. He was probably 3, which would have made me 7 or 8 at the time. Mom was heating up water to make spaghetti. Dave wanted to see what was in the pan. He reached up, grabbed hold of the edge of the pan...fortunately my mom was right there to catch him before he pulled the hot water down on himself. He singed his little fingers a bit, but he learned pretty darned fast things on the stove were hot. My mom told me that her brother did the same thing when he was little. Except, he succeeded in dumping boiling water on his chest and burned himself pretty badly. That story compounded what could have only been a lesson for my brother. To this day, it makes me cringe.

So, the simple lesson: stoves can be hot. We believe touching hot things injures and hurts.

When we were children we believed a lot more easily than we do now as adults. Our minds were more malleable and impressionable. Did you believe in Santa Claus or the Easter bunny? Did you believe if you only had a cape and mask like Superman you could fly? We believed in so much until our experiences told us differently. That cape didn't keep us in the air when we flew off the top of the picnic table. Not all people were kind or good. Toys we loved broke. People we loved disappointed us or died. Life experience causes us to question everything. We dissect until the small bits are comprehensible. Somewhere along the line we learned to put our imaginations aside. We began to believe only in those things we could prove. Ah, the blessing of the age of science! It has created generations of realists.

Thomas was the ultimate realist. He didn't believe in fairy tales. His questions were pretty pointed. We can picture him listening to Jesus as they shared that last meal together. "What do you mean you are going? And how are we supposed to be with you, as you say, when we don't even know the way to get there?" The rest of the disciples were probably holding their breath. "I am the way," Jesus said.

"Yeah, sure," Thomas was thinking, and let it go. But we know Thomas wasn't satisfied with that answer. Jesus wasn't a way, he was a man and it was too bad he often insisted on talking in riddles. (Buechner, *Thomas*)

Then all the things Jesus told them would happen, happened. Thomas saw it all, just like the others. There was no doubt about it that Jesus was dead. But then the thing that nobody could quite believe happened, too. Thomas wasn't around but the rest of them were, locked in a room, scared to go out in case one of them would get it next. Jesus appeared to them and he was no ghost. He said *shalom* and breathed the Holy Spirit on them. He gave them a few instructions to be going on with and left.

Where Thomas was we do not know. The good thing about little imagination is that he didn't get worked up into a panic like his friends did. He may have just been out for a walk, grabbing a latte. When he came back and heard the news, his reaction was just what you'd expect. Prove it.

Eight days later Jesus did come back. Touching his side and seeing his hands, even Thomas couldn't dispute evidence like that. All he could say was, "My lord and my God!" Knowing Thomas as he did, for Jesus that was quite enough. But then he asked that question that has challenged Christians for centuries: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (Buechner, *Thomas*)

We can live without belief. This is called existence. People go about their existence every day with no interruption. Somewhere along the way, the neat little rules for getting along get shattered. A loss of a loved one, a job, a home. An accident. A tragedy. Something happens that is just too big for our brains to make sense of. Reason and realism don't give us the answers we once found so comforting. When my mom died almost two years ago it didn't seem real. I saw her in death, touched her in a final good-bye. My mind simply did not process it. For a while I had dreams where I had to convince her she was not here. More like I was having to convince myself.

We have all had moments when we could not get our minds around what was happening to us. Our natural defenses kicked in to protect us from being overwhelmed. I imagine that is what it was like for the followers of Jesus after that tragic week. Like any of us in the midst of the incomprehensible, they started wondering about the meaning of life. Some gave up, finding nothing to believe in. And there are those for whom it all became clear. We can exist without belief – but belief, or *faith*, gives us life.

Like Thomas, we weren't there when Jesus made his appearances. But like John says, we have the stories so that we too may believe and have life. Believing and having faith comes from experiencing things that we cannot prove. We cannot prove our friend is our friend. We just know how we feel when we are with him. We cannot prove that someone loves us but we know it when we look into her eyes or feel her touch.

Have you cried over anything? Has your heart beat faster in anticipation of seeing someone? Is there anyone you know in whose place, if one of you were suffering, you would volunteer yourself? If you say yes to any of these, chances are you have life. The elements of life are faith, hope and love. We know these things because of our experiences – and they are greater when we recognize Christ alive in others and in ourselves.

Buechner, Frederick. *Peculiar Treasures: a biblical who's who*; "Thomas"; and *Wishful Thinking: a seeker's abc*; "Faith". 1973, 1993, HarperCollins.