

April 20: John 20: 19-31 **"With My Own Eyes"**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' 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.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 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!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this 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.

Today I'm asking you to do something a little bit different. It'll be fun, I promise. I'm asking you to go back in time with me, back to Easter, but not Easter 2008. Let's go back farther, to the days after that first Easter. Jesus' disciples heard strange news from Mary that she had seen Jesus, and they were afraid. In that first week after the resurrection, they had not one but two encounters with the risen Christ. Thomas' story is perhaps the most interesting from these days, so I invite you to hear it from him, as if he were speaking to us today.

I wasn't there, but my friends told me all about it. It was the strangest story I'd ever heard, and I didn't really believe it. Who would? Jesus had said some strange things about the Temple, the presence of God, being destroyed and rebuilt in 3 days, but none of us understood that. All it did was make the Pharisees mad, and give them something else to use against him.

Anyway, it was Sunday afternoon, the first Sunday after the Passover. Jesus had been tried and killed just 3 days before, on Friday. Saturday was the Sabbath, and we all stayed in and prayed that God would show us what to do, since the Master had died and left us. Early Sunday morning, some of the women went to the tomb—and they came back to us with this insane story about the tomb being opened and seeing Jesus alive again. We were, well, skeptical, to put it mildly. And we were scared. If the tomb was empty, someone might have stolen his body. Even worse, someone might accuse *us* of stealing Jesus' body to fake his resurrection—and that could only lead to trials and death for us, too.

We were all scared of what the Jewish authorities might do. After all, they had already managed to have Jesus killed, and we knew that any one of us might be next. My friends, the disciples, had all gone back to the house where we ate the Passover with Jesus, where he said those strange words about the bread and wine being his body and blood. They all went back to that upper room, and locked the door. We were terrified that someone might tell where they were hidden, and that we might be the next to be crucified. Everyone had gone there to talk about what to do next—whether we should leave Israel altogether, or go to the Temple and ask the priests for advice. No one knew what Jesus really wanted us to do next, and we were all in shock.

Jesus had told us more than once that he would die, that he would be killed for who he was. We knew that, I guess, but we never thought it would actually happen. We didn't really believe it. We couldn't imagine that anyone who could do the miracles Jesus did could be tried, and sentenced, and executed like that. We thought God himself would save Jesus—maybe Jesus would step down off the cross, maybe the Holy Spirit would come like an eagle instead of a dove, and drive off Jesus' accusers. But we were wrong, and Jesus was right, as usual.

So even though he had told us what he wanted us to do—to go out and make more disciples, and tell everyone about how God would forgive anyone's sins, if they asked in repentance—we were all afraid to do it. After all, it was the miracles and saying he knew God better than the priests and rabbis and scribes that got Jesus killed in the first place. To go out and teach like he did—to heal people and perform the miracles that he did—well, that was just a little more than we were ready to think

about yet. Instead we hid, and waited, and talked, and tried to absorb the shock of Jesus' death.

Everyone, the Twelve (or maybe I should say the Ten, because Judas was gone, and I wasn't there), along with some of our friends, were hiding out. The door was locked tight, and the shades were drawn on the windows, and they thought they were safe. They huddled together and wept and talked and marveled, because we had all heard from Mary that she had seen Jesus outside the tomb that morning. No one really knew what to think...and then the most incredible thing happened. When I tell you about it, you'll understand why I didn't believe it right away.

Jesus came in to that upper room. Three days dead, open wounds and all—he walked right into the room, *through the door! Through the door!* We had all been terrified before, because we thought someone might break it down, but no one ever thought about anyone walking through it. It's not surprising that the first thing Jesus said was, "Peace to you." I don't guess there was much peace. Can you imagine? This...this ghost...walked through a door and spoke to them. It's a wonder they didn't break the door down themselves trying to get out. And they must have wondered, "Is it really you, Lord?"

He showed them the wound on his hands and his feet and his head and his side. They saw the blood and the scars and then they recognized him—after they saw him with their *own eyes*. And Jesus did the most incredible thing: he breathed the Holy Spirit into each of them. Each one received the breath of life from Jesus, and he said, "If you forgive someone's sins, they are gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what

are you going to do with them?" And before they had a chance to say anything, Jesus was gone.

Well, you know I heard all of this second-hand. I wasn't there when Jesus came, but all my friends made sure I knew about it. To be honest, I didn't really believe them. It was such a crazy story. We all know there's no such thing as ghosts, and if Jesus really had been resurrected in the body, he wouldn't have been able to walk through the door. Their story had some real holes in it, and I just knew they had made it up or had a hallucination or something. So I told them straight out: "I don't believe you. And unless I can see the wounds for myself, and put my finger in the nail holes, I won't believe that you saw Jesus." I'm no one's fool. And they just wouldn't stop talking about it—"Risen" this and "Resurrected" that and "I wonder when we'll see him next." I just knew they'd lost their minds—or were playing a really dirty trick on me.

The next week, though, something amazing happened—and this time, I was there! We were back in the upper room, still trying to come up with some kind of plan. We were still worried about being lynched or stoned or something, still had the door and the windows barricaded, when he walked in—I saw it with my own eyes! Jesus walked right through the locked door and into the room with us. And this time I was the one who thought, "Is it really you, Jesus?"

And then he spoke to us—I heard it with my own ears! He said, "Peace to you," just like he had said before. And boy, did we need a little peace just then. I was stunned. Here I had said it couldn't happen the way they said, but there Jesus was—standing right in front of us!

Everyone just stood there in awe, but Jesus turned and looked straight at me. “Take a good look, Thomas. I’m no ghost. Examine the nail holes. Stick your hand into my wound. Look. Touch. Believe.”

I knew he was no ghost. He was the resurrected Messiah, standing there in front of me, in the flesh. I know, because I looked at the holes in his hands, and I touched the torn muscle and flesh at his side. And despite what common sense or anything else I knew in my head would tell me, I believed that this was Jesus, risen victorious from the grave. The Messiah lived! We weren’t alone! And so I looked at him, and I said, “My master! My God!”

Now we get to the part people never quite seem to understand. So many people think that Jesus was speaking directly to me, rebuking me, when he said, “You believe because you have seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing.” I hear it all the time—you call me “Doubting Thomas” and question my faith. But I’m not the only one who asked, “Is it really you, Jesus?” We had all seen him, and had all heard him speak. Each of us in that little, locked-up room had seen Jesus, and believed in him because of the evidence of our eyes. That’s how we knew him *before* he died—because each of us, from Peter to John, had seen Jesus preach and teach and work miracles. That’s how we knew him to be the Son of God—by what we saw him do.

Jesus didn’t mean that blessing for my friends, who had seen Jesus alive, wounds and all, on that first Easter Sunday and believed once they had seen him. Jesus meant that blessing for all of you—for all Christians everywhere who believe in Jesus even though they don’t have the benefit we did of walking with him, eating

meals with him, and talking and listening to him. Yours is the truer faith—a faith that believes what it has not seen, but only hoped for. Yours is the faith Jesus spoke of, that believes in him without examining the scars, without touching the wounds.

Nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus came into that upper room to encourage us. We were frightened, cowardly, really. We knew that Jesus wanted us to go out and teach and bring others to faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. But we were too afraid. He had told us he'd die, and we had seen it with our own eyes. He told us we'd be persecuted—and we didn't want to see that, or to believe it. It was like that day Peter stepped out of the boat and took a few steps on the water. He stepped out in faith, and he walked on the water, just like Jesus. Then he realized what he was doing, and how strange it was, and he fell in. Jesus told him that he had "little faith."

Up in that upper room we all had "little faith." None of us could quite convince ourselves to take that step out in faith, to face our persecutors and do what Jesus had commanded—not until the Sunday a whole week after Easter and the resurrection. On that day, our "little faith" was strengthened by the Master, and we were renewed. We received the Holy Spirit, and we had the courage to leave that upper room and go out into the world, into a world that was suddenly different, because Jesus was alive again. In the days and years after that first Easter, we made disciples whose faith was even stronger than ours was—because they believed in Jesus even though they had never seen him like we did. They believed, just like you do today, even though they never sat on a hillside with us and listened to him tell stories about birds and seeds, farmers and widows and lost sheep.

Blessed are you, my friends, because you believe what you have not seen. Your faith is great—so is the God we all serve. He promised us eternal life, and then went on ahead to make sure everything was ready. He promised not to leave us alone, and then he left us the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Breath of Life, who lives in us, so that we would never be without God. He promised us peace—and then he gave us peace that is unshakeable in our hearts. And he promised us work: a world full of people who had spiritual and physical needs that he, through us who are called by his name, could meet.

Jesus was my friend. We walked together, talked together, sat out under the stars and prayed together. He showed me things I'd never seen before: blind men receiving sight, lepers being healed of their disease, mercy and compassion to those who are humble and repentant. Jesus and I were close, and because of that closeness, I believed in him. After all, three years of listening to the wonderful things he had to say and watching the wonders he worked around us was pretty convincing. It was easy to believe.

But for all of you, faith is a much greater gift. In this age of technology and science, your faith conquers the restrictions of the world. Instead of saying, "I'll believe it when I see it," you have chosen to believe what you can't see, to embrace the mystery of what is too great for us to understand and too far outside our understanding for us to prove. And because you have, you are heirs to the same gifts and promises he made to us, all those words you read in the Bible—they were made for you, too.

You will never be alone, because you have the Holy Spirit within you. You will walk in the strength of God, who bears our burdens and never abandons us. You have the love of God in your hearts, so that you may share it with others and be richly blessed yourselves. You have the promise of new life in Heaven, where you will be with Jesus for eternity. You have God's mission set for you: to offer healing, help, and relationship to a world in need.

You see, you have the same commitment we did too—the same “marching orders” to go and make disciples, to teach others about the wondrous love of God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. You have the same blessing we did, of being able to tell people about who Jesus was, and what he did, and how much he loves us. And you get to help people meet the same Holy Spirit that Jesus breathed into me, and into my friends, and into you, and know that you can share in the Kingdom of heaven and make it real here and now.

Almost two thousand years ago, a small and very frightened group of people huddled in a little upstairs room, shut in tight against a world they feared. Then the room was filled with the presence of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, the risen Savior. We had no choice but to believe—we had faith in what we saw with our own eyes. And it wasn't “little faith” any more. But as great as our faith was, the Twelve of us who lived and worked and walked and talked with Jesus, your faith is even greater. We saw signs and miracles all around; you have learned to trust the voice of God in your heart.

And this is the promise God makes, the promise I myself heard from the mouth of the Son of God. Believe in it, believe in him, even though you cannot see him like I

did: Blessed are you, because your faith is great, even great than ours. Blessed are you, because you have looked beyond the evidence of your eyes, the proof offered by science, into the mystery of God's great love. Blessed are you, because you have believed what you have not seen.