

SERMON TITLE: “My Lord and My God”

TEXT: John 20:24-31

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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One day, I can't remember how many years ago, a familiar scene played itself out at bedtime in our house. Teeth had been brushed, pajamas crawled into, stories read, and it was time for prayer.

We prayed for the usual things—we thanked God for our blessings, prayed for our family, asked for a good night's sleep with no bad dreams, and pronounced our Amens.

As I was walking out of the bedroom door, one of the kids said, “dad, how come God never says anything to me?”

“What do you mean,” I asked. (Inwardly I was rehearsing a whole bunch of fine theological arguments about the many and varied ways that God “speaks” to us.)

“Well, I never hear him say anything. I've asked. And how come we can't see God?”

Gulp.

It's amazing how the most innocent question from a curious child can cut right through six years and thousands of dollars worth of theological education ☺.

Some of us have been doing this “God thing” for so long that we might forget that curious hunger to see God. We might forget this innocent expectation that if we're going to talk to God, why not expect to see him or hear from him from time to time.

We have just walked through the Easter season, we have read about some very specific events that happened in the life of Jesus—the Last Supper, his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection.

We've have told the familiar story about what God has done for us and for the world in the life of Jesus.

But all of that stuff happened **two thousand years ago!!** None of us were there.

We can *read* about Jesus' crucifixion and imagine the scenes—the anger of the crowd, the pain of betrayal, the anguish of the cross, the wonder at the resurrection.

But we can't transport ourselves back in time to see it and experience it.

We weren't there. And so, just as with the story of Christmas and God becoming one of us, we *read* the stories, we affirm their centrality in how we look at the world, and then we move on.

Each year, after Christmas and Easter—these highlights of the Christian year—I often find myself asking the “now what?” question.

Jesus has come.... Now what?

Jesus is risen from the dead... now what?

We've spent some time over the last four weeks looking at parts of the Gospel of John through the lens of “choice.”

We have seen that to be human is to choose.

Today our theme is to “choose to believe.” But in a sense, we've been talking about belief throughout.

Choose life = choose to *believe* that life is good, that it is a gift, that life is worth living.

Choose Jesus = choose to *believe* that Jesus is who he says he is, that he is the way, the truth, and the life, that he is the solution to the problem of sin and evil.

Choose to forgive = choose to *believe* that there is power and freedom in letting go of hurt and pain, and that there is life and healing and hope to be found there (even when it doesn't look like it).

Choose resurrection = choose to *believe* that in raising Jesus from the dead, God's power over death and sin and evil is demonstrated, and that this resurrection power is at work in the lives of Jesus' followers today.

So we've already been talking about the choice to believe!

For some of us, these are new beliefs and there is excitement and anticipation in learning how to live into them

But for many of us, I suspect, we have believed these things for a long time:

- Jesus was God's son: check
- Jesus forgave, so I need to forgive: check
- Jesus died on the cross for my sins: check

- Jesus rose from the dead: check
- The whole package is my ticket to eternal life: check

I suspect that many of us don't have much trouble choosing to believe. Some certainly do, but for most of us the questions are, what does this belief actually mean? and what difference does this belief make?

I think our passage this morning gives us a window into some of these issues.

In my opinion, the passage we're going to read has to be one of the most exciting, surprising, confusing, frightening times in Scripture.

We are given a window into the days after the world was changed forever.

Let's set the stage from John's gospel, and then we'll read the passage itself (from John 19-20 if you want to follow):

- All of the events of Holy Week are in the rearview mirror
- Jesus has been arrested, crucified, buried by Joseph of Arimathea
- The stone has been rolled away from the tomb, Mary Magdalene has discovered this and she has run to get Peter and John who have also seen the empty tomb. None of them realize that Jesus has been raised at this point; they just assume that someone has taken his body
- Peter and John return home, while Mary remained confused and grieving.
- It is here that Jesus actually makes his first post-resurrection appearance—he talks to Mary, who initially thinks he is the gardener, he asks her why she is crying, she begs to be told where Jesus' body has been taken
- Jesus calls her name, and she realizes who she is speaking with... she tries to cling to him out of joy; Jesus tells her instead to go and tell his brothers—the disciples—that he is ascending
- Mary tears back to the disciples and announces that she has seen the Lord!

The scene is set for triumph and vindication—Jesus is not dead, he was telling the truth, the disciples were right to put their trust in him...

But what do we see?

Well, we see the disciples huddling behind locked doors. They don't seem to believe Mary! In fact, in Luke, it says that they thought Mary's report was "an idle tale" or "nonsense" (Luke 24:11).

(Interesting that Jesus would first appear to a witness that would not have been held in high esteem... Interesting that the men wouldn't listen...)

So Jesus appears to his disciples (minus Thomas), he commissions them to do his work, breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. The disciples are overjoyed, and... a week later they're back in the house, back behind locked doors.

The stage is set for our passage this morning:

READ JOHN 20:24-31

This passage describes a scene that I have, since I was a little boy, wished I could have been a part of.

Like the story I began with about my kids wondering why they couldn't hear God, I wanted to hear from Jesus with *my* ears, to see him with my eyes. When I first heard the story of "doubting Thomas," I thought, "Yes, that's me! I would have wanted the same thing! I would have said the same thing! "I want to see Jesus, then I'll have no problem believing!!"

I wonder if all of us have wished that we were Thomas when we hear this story.

Just show me. I'll believe it when I see it.

This is the message that jumps off the bookshelves in the popular books on religion at Chapters. "Where's the evidence? I'm not going to believe unless I have proof." We certainly live in skeptical times.

But probably not uniquely so. We often think or assume that those who came before us were somehow inclined to believe in all kinds of things for which they had no evidence, but the story of Thomas shows us that "I'll believe it when I see it is hardly new."

And so Jesus grants Thomas proof. But he does much more than that, as well. He teaches Thomas and the other disciples, and through them, he teaches us.

There are a number of things that leap out at me from this text; things that I think God would have us learn from this post-Easter story this morning.

1. Doubting Thomas?

- a. This passage is not a condemnation of Thomas as the “skeptical disciple.”
 - b. Thomas gets a bad rap because he didn’t believe (“Doubting Thomas” is not a positive term).
 - c. Thomas is like all of us:
 - i. Courage: John 11:16 (we might as well go and die with Jesus—Judeans were going to stone him if he went back to Lazarus)
 - ii. Confusion: 14:5 (we don’t know where you are going, how can we know the way?! after Jesus tells him that he is going to prepare a place for them)
 - d. **BUT** the other disciples *had also* seen, and yet they were still hiding behind locked doors. If we go back a few verses to John 20:20, we see that Jesus showed the other disciples his hands and side as well
 - e. the other disciples only believed after they had seen as well! The other gospels give the strong impression that *they* didn’t believe without evidence either because they didn’t take Mary seriously
2. It is interesting to note what Jesus says, “Peace be with you” **and** “stop doubting and believe”
- a. Jesus is both compassionate and firm; he meets Thomas in his weakness, but he doesn’t leave him there.
 - b. Jesus’ **first** word to his disciples—both times he appears to them—is “peace”
 - c. He speaks this word of peace to a frightened, confused group of people whose world has been shattered
 - d. He speaks this word of peace despite the fact that he could have quite rightly condemned them for abandoning him in his darkest hour
 - e. In the first instance, this is followed by him sending them out to do his work; in the second instance, it is followed by granting Thomas’ request, and encouraging him to believe.

- f. Jesus comforts and he challenges—Thomas, and us. He acknowledges our doubt... and that he tells us to get on with it and get to work.
3. Important for us to see that this is not necessarily just a story about skepticism (as we think of the term), but a story about allegiance
 - a. We tend to read stories through our own questions, and this one is no different. Atheism and unbelief are big issues in twenty-first century, secular Canada, but is this what the passage is talking about?
 - b. Thomas was not saying that because he had seen Jesus perform a really impressive trick, that he would now believe in a divine being that he couldn't see.
 - c. Important to note what Thomas says when he sees Jesus' hands and feet—"my Lord and my God"
 - d. "Lord" was a term often reserved for Roman Emperors—insisted on being called "Lord" (Caesar is Lord)
 - e. Christians were often persecuted not because they believed in God or gods while others did not; the emperor didn't really care what they believed about Jesus in the privacy of their own minds
 - f. The issue was allegiance. Declaring that "Caesar was Lord" was a way of acknowledging that your allegiance was to the empire and its methods. Thomas' declaration is a declaration of allegiance!
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Post-Easter Allegiance

So where does this leave us?

It is good to be reminded that Jesus' words to Thomas are spoken to us too:

- Peace be with you
- Stop doubting, and believe

We, too, experience both the compassion and the firmness of God's voice.

It is encouraging to know that we are not the first people who have struggled to believe in what we cannot see, or who have had half-hearted and misguided allegiance to our Lord and our God, and that Jesus speak peace into our confused and confusing times as well.

At the same time, we, too, have a **choice** to make. We are faced with the choice of what we will do with this Easter Jesus.

The choice to believe is not a decision we make once and then never make again.

We must *daily* choose to believe. We must daily choose, in our thoughts, in our actions, in our choices, where our allegiance lies.

On Friday we had a royal wedding, tomorrow we have a national election. Both events speak to the question of allegiance—two very different kinds of “lordship” for which allegiance is demonstrated in very different ways.

Our text this morning asks us, Where is our allegiance?

Our allegiance is demonstrated by what we do.

To choose to believe is to say that Jesus—not money, not technology, not entertainment, not sex, not influence, not knowledge and reputation, not political power, not... whatever—is Lord.

It is to choose forgiveness rather than to hold grudges; it is to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to extend grace where it is not deserved...

It is to choose to endure the trials and pains of life with joy and hope, believing that we are “more than conquerors through him who loved us” to quote Paul in Romans 8:37.

It is to live as though Jesus and his kingdom are more real and more strong than the many things that compete for our allegiance every day.

This was what the first disciples were faced with. Jesus was standing in front of them—this guy they had just seen whipped, beaten, mocked, crucified, and buried—and they had to decide where their allegiance lay.

They chose to answer with their lives. Jesus told them that he was sending them, and so they went and spread the good news, and the church was born.

Often they suffered greatly for their choice to believe—almost all of the apostles died extremely violent deaths.

Interestingly, it is widely believed that Thomas traveled further than any of the other disciples to preach the gospel—some say as far as India!

The point: *the choice to believe is answered with our lives.*

Help My Unbelief

Jesus' famous words to Thomas are these:

“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Maybe Jesus is talking about us here! Maybe he is calling you and me blessed because we believe and follow and love, even when we don't see. Even when it is hard.

Beyond this story... “I do believe... Help my unbelief”

- For most of us, belief is not like a light switch that we can just turn on and off. Sometimes our belief feels stronger, sometimes it feels weaker... Like the man whose son was healed in Mark 9, we cry out “I do believe, help my unbelief”
- We need each other to teach, encourage, and strengthen our belief
 - None of the disciples were exactly shining lights of unwavering confidence and belief in Jesus; but all were strengthened, their eyes were opened, as Jesus taught them, together
 - Like the disciples, we need each other to keep on believing, to keep on choosing to follow, to obey, to love.
 - **Story of John Jung last week! Picking up a fallen flower**

We choose to believe, and we demonstrate allegiance *together*.

There are times when it is hard to believe. Sometimes it may be hard to believe the existence of a God we can't see or hear... More often it often it is hard to believe with our actions and our allegiances.

And so we lean on each other, we borrow from those whose belief is a bit stronger or more stable than our own at the moment.

But we need each other.

I believe, help my unbelief.

We say these words when we commit to this body, whether formally in membership, or in any of the other less public ways that we demonstrate our belonging to the body of Christ.

We say these words when we take the Lord's Supper.

I believe, help my unbelief.

My Lord and my God.

I am going to close with the words from another apostle, Peter, from 1 Peter 1:

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade...

⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Amen.