

My Lord and My God!

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, John 20:19-31 (ESV)

September 9, 2007

The once doubting but now believing Thomas affirmed his faith by exclaiming, “My Lord and my God!” John the evangelist, author of this gospel, affirmed his faith by writing, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” How do we affirm our faith? What do we believe? Can we make these affirmations our own? Thomas echoes our reading from Deuteronomy, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” and his profession of what he believes forms the climax of this gospel. John summarizes the message of the entire gospel, indeed of all the Scriptures, and thereby invites you and me to make our own profession that we believe in Jesus as our Lord and our God, as the Christ and the Son of God. Do you believe this with all your heart?

John wrote at the end of this chapter, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” This is the statement of purpose of his entire work. This is the reason he wrote what he did. It is all in order that we may believe and so live, in direct fulfillment of God’s stated purpose in John 3:16 of giving his only Son. We need to explore and to understand this overall purpose first. Then we will come back to what Thomas said.

What are we to believe? How are we to live? We are to believe that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” This is what John has spent his gospel telling us. Jesus of Nazareth, a small town in an occupied country on the fringe of the Roman Empire, is none other than the Word of God. This same Jesus of Nazareth is also the light of the world, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the bread of life, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way, the truth, and the life, the true vine, the one who has overcome the world, the crucified one, and the one who has risen from the dead. That is to say, Jesus is the Christ, the long expected, much anticipated, hoped for, and longed for, anointed one from God, whom he sent to make things right again not only between us and God but also among us. It was an ancient expectation, but is it not also a current and continuing need for us today? Jesus is the Christ, and he accomplished all this not only by his incarnation and by his teaching but also and especially, strangely enough, by his crucifixion and resurrection. This is the good news of the gospel.

Not only is Jesus the Christ, but also he is the Son of God. This does not at all mean that he is less than God. It does mean, instead, precisely the opposite, that Jesus is none other than God himself with us and for us. Jesus is the way that God came to be with us and for us, as one of us, fully human and simultaneously fully divine. That is the wonder of who he is. That is the basis for the good work he accomplished. Jesus is the Son of God. This, too, is the good news of the gospel.

What, then, is the result of our believing “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God”? “By believing you may have life in his name.” This is the goal. Believing is not simply for the sake of believing, as such. It is instead the means through which God gives us the even greater gift of life itself. As we have all learned from John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” That is why God gave us Jesus Christ, so that we may have life, even eternal life, knowing God as the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent (John 17:3 (ESV)). As Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10b (ESV)). And knowing God and Christ is life itself. Nothing is more important to us than this. Eternal life begins in this world and continues into the next world. This is what God wants to give us. This is what Jesus came to give us. This is what John wants us to have. This is the purpose of the gospel.

Now, given that this is the purpose of the gospel, the question arises as to how we receive the gift of believing. I almost asked how we receive the gift of faith, but I remembered that John never uses the noun “faith” or even the nouns “belief” or “believer.” He always uses the verb “believe,” so I will try to conform to that. How do we receive the gift of believing? It is, of course, no accident that this question arises precisely within the context of the once doubting but now believing Thomas. Or rather, the account of Thomas coming to believe becomes the occasion for John to affirm that God intends the same transition for you and for me. So, how is it that doubting Thomas became believing Thomas? How did he move, in one week’s time, from “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” to “My Lord and my God!”? And what can that possibly have to do with us?

It is not insignificant that doubting Thomas began as absent Thomas. All the rest of the disciples were gathered on that first Easter evening. Thomas was not there. Who knows what he had to do that he thought was so important that he did not need to be with the other disciples on the first Easter evening, but for whatever reason he was not there. And so he missed out on the very first Easter. So far, only Mary Magdalene had seen the risen Lord, and that had been early in the morning. What a strange and long day that must have been! Could it be true? Was he alive

again? What did it mean? “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” The risen Lord Jesus Christ himself came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” It does not say they unlocked the door. It does not say he opened the door. It says he came and stood among them. And with his arrival, we find the beginning of Sunday worship. The Jews worshiped on the Sabbath, which begins on Friday evening and runs through Saturday. But here these Jewish disciples were gathered on a Sunday for the first time. They were gathered, the word of God was spoken, and the hearing disciples were made glad. The glad disciples were commissioned to go out into the world, and they were given the Holy Spirit to cheer them on the way. And then it was over.

Was it perhaps even later that same night that these other disciples caught up with absent Thomas? Was he the first hearer of their new gospel preaching? The other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” He must have been fit to be tied. He said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Why was he so stubborn? Why was he so crude? Was he embarrassed? It does not say. But thus he has borne the name of doubting Thomas to this very day.

What we do know is that the following Sunday, the next time the disciples were gathered inside, hope against hope, Thomas was present. He may have messed up one time, but he was not going to miss out again. Thomas was present, and the shift from being absent Thomas to being present Thomas became the first step in the shift from being doubting Thomas to being believing Thomas. His desire to see and to touch Jesus Christ very reasonably led him back to the very same place where Jesus Christ had been seen and heard before. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe it was stubbornness. Maybe it was a failure to believe. Whatever it was, we know that Thomas was not there because he believed. He was there despite the fact he disbelieved, or perhaps precisely because he disbelieved. He did not enter the gathering believing in the risen Jesus. That is the whole point of this story, this account of what happened to Thomas. He did not enter the gathering believing in the risen Jesus. He entered disbelieving. He entered doubting. He entered as a skeptic. He entered as one who had seen Jesus, heard Jesus, admired Jesus, and even followed Jesus in his earthly life, but he did not believe in the resurrection. He did not believe in Easter. But at least he came to see.

Then, strangely enough, it happened all over again. “Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” Jesus was present, the word of God was spoken, and the gospel of Jesus Christ was proclaimed: “Peace be with you.” Then it got personal. Jesus said to Thomas, “Put

your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side.” It occurs to me that the significance of these wounds is that while the first half of this chapter proclaims that the crucified Jesus has been resurrected, the second half of this chapter proclaims that the resurrected Jesus is none other than the one who had been crucified. Both of these aspects are important. Jesus, who was crucified, dead, and buried, has now been raised to new and eternal life, as a vindication of his sacrifice. At the same time, and the other way around, the risen and reigning Lord Jesus Christ is none other than the one who suffered and died for us.

Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Can you not hear him speaking even to us? It was not so much this demonstration of his wounds as it was this direct command that led Thomas to believe. Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Thomas dropped his previously stated requirements. He laid aside his crudeness. He no longer sought to put his finger into the wounds or his hand into his side. In a simple, complete, utter turnaround of his life, Thomas answered Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” The absent Thomas had become present, and as a direct result of that, the doubting Thomas had become believing. As John soon explains, it was at that moment that Thomas came to life, to eternal life, knowing God and his Christ.

In addition to Thomas being present at this second Sunday service, Jesus Christ also was present again, visibly, audibly, and tangibly present. That would do it! We began this section with a question: How is it that doubting Thomas became believing Thomas? How did he move, in one week’s time, from “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” to “My Lord and my God!”? In his case, the immediate physical presence of the newly resurrected Jesus Christ did it, bringing doubting Thomas to believe. That makes sense to us, and at the same time it exacerbates our additional question: What can that possibly have to do with us? What can that possibly have to do with us, who long to believe, who long to see Jesus, who long to hear his voice? We are here, present and accounted for. We are here in the Sunday gathering of the disciples. We are seeking Jesus. We long to believe and to believe more and more. And yet, he does not appear to us or for us. What can this possibly mean?

Jesus anticipated our situation, and John saved his anticipation for us. Immediately after the climax of this gospel, immediately after the present Thomas sees Jesus and so professes what he believes, “My Lord and my God!”, in the very next sentence, Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” “Blessed are those

who have not seen and yet have believed.” Do you hear that? “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” The risen Lord Jesus Christ was talking to believing Thomas about you and me. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” It is possible not to see and yet to believe. It is intended that we not see and yet believe. It is a part of the plan that we not see and yet believe. In fact, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon us for not seeing and yet believing. I submit to you that there was one way that Thomas came to believe. It was not simply that he saw Jesus Christ, though that was a blessing beyond measure and important even for our sake. I submit to you that Thomas came to believe because the risen Lord Jesus Christ told him to do so: “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” And I submit to you that the risen Lord Jesus Christ, speaking through this same word of God yet today, in this our gathered Sunday worship, is continuing to say the same thing to you and to me, “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Do you not hear the very word of Jesus Christ in this word of God? Do you not hear the command? Receive the gift! “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Thanks be to God!

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” Not only does Jesus bless those who do not see and yet believe, but also John confirms that such believing and living are the very purpose of this entire gospel, the very purpose of the Bible, the very purpose of our gathered worship, the very purpose of the church, and so he issues to us an invitation to believe and to live. Can we say what we believe along with believing Thomas, saying, “My Lord and my God!”? Say it with me: “My Lord and my God!” Say it again: “My Lord and my God!” And yet again: “My Lord and my God!”

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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