

Wed. of Rorate Coeli
John 20:19–31 (St. Thomas)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 21, 2022
(repurposed from Quasimodo Geniti 2022)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Much of the Advent season, like so much of our faith, deals with trusting in the promises of God despite our doubts. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord in a few days, we look ahead to the week after Easter, where the disciples locked themselves away in the upper room in fear. At first, the Apostle Thomas does not receive the Word of God in simple faith. Instead he demands proof. That's why he's traditionally been given the nickname: "doubting Thomas." Today we wrestle with our own doubts, yet the Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts through the Word of God.

Right after His resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared in the upper room where the disciples were, locked away for fear of the Jews. Could they show any more doubt than that? Yet Jesus comes to the disciples and shows them His pierced hands and the hole in His side to prove this really was Jesus Christ, crucified and on the third day raised from the dead. But Thomas was not with them. Thomas only had the other disciples' word: "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas wanted proof, the same proof Jesus already gave to the others: "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." Thomas spent three years with Jesus, soaking up the message that the Son of Man would be handed over to the authorities, beaten, crucified, and on the third day raised from the dead. But Thomas would not believe the words of the Apostles until he

himself experienced the crucified and risen LORD. The Word alone was not enough for Thomas. He wanted something more.

Eight days later, that next Sunday, Jesus again stood among the disciples despite the locked doors. Jesus presented the same evidence to Thomas that He presented to the other disciples, the wounds in His hands and His side. Doubting Thomas came to believe. Doubting Thomas exclaimed: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas saw the crucified Lord risen from the dead with His very eyes and so He believed. Jesus responds with a question for Thomas and for us: “Have you believed because you have seen me?” What Jesus is getting at is that faith deals with what is unseen, with belief, not sight. We are saved by faith alone, and the nature of faith is to trust God’s Word even when all evidence appears to contradict it. The nature of faith is to trust God’s Word even when our own reason and feelings appear to go against it. The Word of God is more powerful than our doubts, so powerful that it can overcome our doubts.

How often do we, like Thomas, not receive the Word of God in the simplicity of faith? We don’t simply trust the Word. We want something more. We want God to prove something to us. We expect a sign from Heaven to confirm us in our beliefs. Or at least for Him to touch our lives for the better even in a small way. We want to feel the Lord’s presence. Then we would really know that He’s out there. Sometimes you hear people ask: “If there really is a God, then why doesn’t He just reveal Himself? Then everyone would believe!” But already in Scripture we are told that: “The fool says in His heart: ‘There is no God’” (Ps 14:1). And Jesus says that even if someone were to rise from the dead, that wouldn’t make a person repent if they don’t already believe Moses and the prophets, that is, if they don’t already believe the written Word of God (Luke 16:31). Belief and unbelief are matters far beyond merely seeing physical evidence or not. Seeing is not necessarily believing, because we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

That's why Jesus continues: "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have believed." Here Jesus is talking about you, about all those who have *not* actually seen the crucified and risen LORD yet have believed on account of the apostolic word. You are the people Jesus prayed for in the High Priestly prayer: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20). Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. Blessed are you who believe in the crucified and risen Christ despite your feelings or earthly reason. Blessed are you because faith does not come from what is seen. Faith comes from what is heard. As the Apostle Paul says: "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). It was necessary for Christ to prove His resurrection to the disciples. Eyewitnesses are necessary. But now, since the time of the apostles, the Holy Spirit creates faith through their account of our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection from the dead, an account proclaimed throughout the entire world. This is a message to be received in childlike faith, in a completely passive way.

Blessed are you because the Holy Spirit has given you faith through that Word of God, because you believe the Word of God about who Jesus is and what He came to do. Blessed are you even though you were not there at the manger, at the cross or in the upper room, or even at the empty tomb. Blessed are you who hear the apostolic testimony and believe what Jesus did for you in his birth, death, and resurrection from the dead. All good things from God are received in childlike faith, the faith that instinctively trusts in the giver. It is the Holy Spirit who through God's Word works that faith in you and it is the Holy Spirit who will bring that faith to completion at the day of Jesus Christ, the day that you are fully grown up into salvation.

It is no accident that St. John concludes his account of Thomas encountering the crucified and risen LORD by summarizing the entire purpose of the Holy Scriptures: "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.” John says: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book.” God is working all the time, all over the world, and throughout history to gather His people to Himself. Our Lord is doing so much more behind the scenes than we could ever imagine. Even Jesus in His earthly ministry did more than we could wrap our minds around. As John says at the end of his Gospel: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

God did not give us the Bible as a quaint story book during the Christmas season or to fill us in on the hidden will of God and the precise reasons for why things are the way they are. No, there is a more definite purpose. These things 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.” Eternal life comes as the Holy Spirit works through the oral preaching of God’s Word, despite any and all appearances to the contrary. In faith, we trust God’s Word even when our perception of reality does not match what we hear. We trust that God is faithful and will bring to pass everything He has promised in His own time.

Even though he is known primarily as “doubting Thomas,” we see that Thomas was quickly led by the Holy Spirit to a firm faith in the crucified and risen Jesus. According to tradition, in A.D. 52 Thomas made his way to India, where he proclaimed that Gospel faithfully for another 20 years before his martyrdom. You can still visit his traditional burial site to this day. Only a man of confident faith could have concluded his life as St. Thomas. All his doubts were overcome by our Lord and His Word. On this St. Thomas day, let us thank our LORD for how much we learn about the nature of faith through Thomas’s initial doubts.