**Firsthand Faith**

**By Jeff McDowell**

**4-27-25**

**2nd Easter**

**Horseheads UMC**

**Scriptures: Rev. 1:4-8 & John 20:19-31**

**Sermon theme:** Thomas is famous for his doubting that Jesus was alive, but there is much more to this story. He wanted to personally experience Jesus, risen and alive! Once he had that chance, he believed Jesus was divine. How many of us are like him, not wanting to believe what other people say, but having personal proof. God will meet us at our point of need. God wants us to call upon Him. God wants to prove to us that He is real, and that Jesus is truly the Lord of life. What will it take for you to believe that Jesus is risen from the dead and will overcome your death with joyful living? Jesus appears to Thomas saying “Do not doubt, but believe.” When you have firsthand faith, you will never waver again.

**Revelation 1:4-8**

**4**John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, **5**and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, **6**and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

**7**Look! He is coming with the clouds;
    every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
    and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen. **8**‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

**John 20:19-31**

**19**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.’ **20**After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. **21**Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ **22**When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. **23**If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

**24**But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. **25**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.’

**26**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.’ **27**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.’ **28**Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ **29**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.’

**30**Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. **31**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.

Grace and Peace to you, from the One who is and was and is coming again! This famous phrase from Revelation speaks of a faith in Christ as the supreme Lord, something Christians have believed since Christ was raised.
Today I want to talk with you about faith, and doubt and assurance that can carry you through the tough times of your life.

Today on this second Sunday of Easter (yes, the easter season continues), I want to talk candidly about our fragile and powerful faith. Oh, the candy may be gone from our baskets but we spend more time celebrating the fact that Christ overcame death itself, and that can give us hope for living in our dangerous world.

There’s an old saying: “A lie travels halfway around the world before the truth can put its pants on.” The saying is attributed to Mark Twain.

There’s only one problem. The famous American humorist probably never said it. Twain scholars have scoured his writings and have never been able to find it. Yet, if you Google the quotation, you’ll find dozens of quotations websites attributing it to Twain, but only a very few debunking it.

Ironic, isn’t it? That quotation — about a lie traveling halfway around the world — is very likely a lie itself.

Have you ever wondered, even though you go to church, pray at meals, read the bible occasionally, and recite the creeds about your beliefs, if all this is actually real and true? Like, does your faith make a real difference in how you live, and is the promise of heaven a tangible, believable hope? Or is it all a big lie?

As much at Brice read his bible (especially Revelation), prayed for forgiveness for all his past sins, worked through is abuse as a child, and the pattern of how he then abused others; as much at Brice went to church, was baptized as an adult, and talked with me about all his troubled life and his faith in Christ, when he was very ill, he doubted that God would accept him at all because of all he had done wrong. After I left that church to serve on the conference, he took seriously ill and died. I wondered if all our talks about grace, mercy and forgiveness through Christ had taken root in his mind and heart. I knew Brice would be with God, because Christ died on the cross for him. But I wondered if Brice believed it.

After the death of Mother Theresa, that a journal was found as well as some of her letters to others. Ben Young writes an article about her doubts and faith in Crosswalk.

*What most people don’t know is that throughout her life she felt plagued by the pain of doubt. She wrote: “I feel just that terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting me, of God not being God, of God not really existing.”1 And in another personal letter, she struggled with accepting the love of Jesus: “Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.”2*

Some theologians have called this kind of silence from heaven “the dark night of the soul,” when they feel no response from God to their prayers.

There is something we need, or want, or hope for in this life and that is ironclad faith. James writes to the early church ab out faith:

**5**If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. **6*But ask in faith, never doubting***, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; **7, 8**for the doubter, being ***double-minded and unstable*** in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

That sounds harsh, James! And if you have ever doubted that God is real, that God loves you and that God wants to use you in service to your fellow humans, then you must feel terrible about reading this bible verse!

But today’s story from John’s gospel tells a different story about doubt and faith. Thomas wasn’t there when the other disciples saw the empty tomb. He wasn’t there when the risen Jesus appeared to the others in the upper room. He missed the words of peace when Jesus came. It seemed like a ghost to him; appearing, not appearing, and definitely not appearing to him!

On the Missouri license plates, the state motto is written: “The show me state.”

This comes perhaps from U.S. Congressman Willard Duncan Vandiver. During his time as a member of the U.S. House Committee on Naval Affairs, Vandiver traveled to Philadelphia in 1899 to attend a naval banquet.

During his speech at the naval event, Vandiver said, *"I come from a state that raises corn and cotton and cockleburs and Democrats, and frothy eloquence neither convinces nor satisfies me. I am from Missouri.* ***You have got to show me."***

For our faith, I am not sure that is a bad thing. But how can I prove to you the existence of God? How can I show you something like that?

Listen to another take on faith from the book of Hebrews in the New Testament:

Hebrews New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

***11****Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.****2****Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.****3****By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

Living Bible:  *It is the certainty that what we hope for is waiting for us, even though we cannot see it up ahead.*

Message: *faith is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It’s our handle on what we can’t see.*

So, now on to Thomas the disciple. He was one of the 12 trusted followers.

He was there when Jesus performed miracles. He saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead after 4 days of being buried! Thomas was there when Jesus changed the water into wine, feed the 5,000 men plus their women and children with a few loaves and fish. He was there when Jesus made the blind man see and the lame man walk. He had enough evidence to believe Jesus was the savior.

But this idea of others that they saw Jesus alive, after Thomas had seen him crucified, was hard to believe.

He wanted what that hymn writer testified, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, or what a foretaste of glory divine!”

And John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had to come to faith himself with a “heart strangely warmed” during a bible study in England on night.

So Doubting Thomas really wanted a personal experience of Jesus, risen from the dead.

Turn with me to this ancient Creed, the Apostle’s Creed, p. 881.

Here is part of the Creed by Hillsong (contemp. Music)

*I believe in God our Father
I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit
Our God is three in One
I believe in the resurrection
That we will rise again
For I believe in the Name of Jesus*

*I believe in You
I believe You rose again
I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord
And I believe in You
I believe You rose again
I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord*

Beautiful and a great reminder, but it’s not enough to simply recite a creed of the church at a church service. What really matters is the sense of faith deep within your heart that you know that you know that you know that God is real, that God loves you and you are forgiven for all your sins… that you own eternal life through faith in His son Jesus.

Thomas, when he finally saw Jesus face to face, believed. Jesus offered for Thomas to come, feel his side wound, his wounded hands and feet, and by then, Thomas didn’t need to do that. On seeing him, Thomas shouted, “My Lord and My God!”

When you know, you know.

You may have doubts in your mind, your heart, and many of those might be like this:

I know others are saved, other people believe and others in the church have great faith. But I really want to know for myself, see for myself, and have proof that God is real, God loves me and God is going to get me through this difficult life.

But its ok to test God and try God, as far as your faith will take you. Ask God for proof, evidence, and encounter. And I believe God will give you exactly what you need.

C.S. Lewis once famously remarked that he believed in Christianity just like he believed in the sun: *“Not only because I see it,”* he said, “*but because by it I see everything else.”*

Brandon Ambrosino, who covers culture and religion for Vox.com, wrote, *“That’s how I see Jesus’ resurrection; not so much an event I look at*, as an event I look through*. …Each morning, the sun is reborn; each spring, harvests come back to life; after each disappointment, our dashed hopes are reanimated, and soar to even newer heights. For all the death and evil and greed and ugliness of our world, I can’t shake the fact that every last atom of this place is pulsing in time with the rhythm of resurrection.”*

Proof? [Psalm 19:1-4](https://biblehub.com/psalms/19.htm) declares, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

In [Romans 1:20](https://biblehub.com/romans/1-20.htm) , the Apostle Paul reinforces this idea, stating, "For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

God will meet us at our point of need. God wants us to call upon Him. God wants to prove to us that He is real, and that Jesus is truly the Lord of life. What will it take for you to believe that Jesus is risen from the dead and will overcome your death with joyful living? Jesus appears to Thomas saying “Do not doubt, but believe.” When you have firsthand faith, you will never waver again.