

## **BLESSED ARE YOU**

Show a bag with hidden objects in it. Look inside, and name the contents one by one. Ask if people believe what you are saying before producing the object, including some apparently unbelievable items. What about someone who is not in the room when this exercise takes place - will they believe based on what others say or demand evidence?

After Mary Magdalene witnesses the risen Jesus, the disciples find themselves gathered, in a kind of limbo, not knowing where to go or what to do next. They are just waiting and wondering. Suddenly, Jesus appears to them and offers them a word of peace.

We see the apostles bewildered and struggling to make sense of the news of the resurrection of Jesus. In both appearances recorded in the passage from John that Phillip read for us it is noticeable that they are together in a locked room. Despite the personal manifestation to all but Thomas they are still afraid a week after Jesus first appears to them.

Here we see the disciples in a familiar light - confused, scared, and warily meeting in private behind closed doors. Mary related to them the events in the garden that morning. They heard that Jesus had been raised, but have not yet accessed the power of that risen life. When Jesus appears and greets them he shows them the physical evidence of his crucifixion. They are overjoyed! They are commissioned by Jesus - sent out as he was sent - enlivened by the Holy Spirit and given authority to declare the forgiveness of sins. Yet they are still huddled together when Jesus appears again a week later.

For some reason Thomas is absent on the first occasion of the resurrected Jesus coming to his disciples - Thomas has not seen Jesus with his own eyes. He is quite understandably sceptical and demands physical proof when the others tell him of their encounter. Thomas is like a patron saint for those of us who are trying to live a critical faith. He is not satisfied with other people's accounts: he wants to know by experience!

Who can blame him? Thomas says, *unless I see . . . I will not believe*. Which of us would not react as Thomas did? You need only to think of someone you have lost who was dear to you, and imagine hearing reports that they are actually alive after all - would you believe it? I think Thomas speaks for all of us when he asks for some tangible proof. We like to have our facts straight - it's only responsible, after all, in this age of reason to support our claims with substantiated evidence.

The following Sunday Jesus offers Thomas that proof, but the sight of Jesus is enough and he believes, uttering the words, *my Lord and my God*. Jesus does not rebuke him, but simply leaves them all with this blessing and challenge in one: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*. What falls into this category for you? There is much that we have not seen and yet believe in this world. We rely on the proof of others, the knowledge they have, for our faith. For example, I use a computer quite comfortably. I can tell you the basics about what part is what and use it as a tool to communicate and accomplish tasks. But can I explain to you how on earth when I type something and press send, my message is instantly delivered anywhere in the world? Not a chance! I can't see or understand it yet I believe it!

Thomas' response leads Jesus to acknowledge the faith of those who believe without visual or physical evidence – the situation for each one of us today! We can believe in the science that makes planes fly, cameras capture images for eternity, phones transmit our voices wirelessly around the world, because we trust people that we will never meet to know, to understand, to prove, to invent, on our behalf. But for the intangible, we are forever skeptics. We believe in love perhaps – we just fail to believe that we can be worthy of the love that others offer, and fail to believe that it is important for us to boundlessly give our love to others. We've heard about grace, but we still don't believe that God wants to give it to us for free, that we can't somehow earn it, and we certainly don't like it when God goes around giving it freely to everyone else. We believe that Jesus lived and died and rose, but that doesn't necessarily convince us that what he taught is important enough to actually try to follow.

The early Christians of that first century – those who first heard John's gospel, and many generations after them, must have treasured the story of Thomas – enjoyed hearing how he would not believe Jesus was alive until he saw and touched for himself. They must have loved the story, not because it made Thomas look silly – I don't think it does that at all – it highlights the remarkable thing that had happened to those believers who came to faith in the generations after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – they had never seen Jesus, yet belief had come to them.

They listened to witnesses, to personal testimony, and as they listened the brilliant truth which exceeded all explanation took hold of their hearts and they believed. The witness of other believers was corroborated by the power of the Holy Spirit within them. These people who had never seen Jesus – people just like you and me – delighted in the story of Thomas because it touched their own story; especially those potent words... *Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*.

What will it take for you to believe? What kind of proof are you looking for? What will convince you and convict you so much of who Jesus was, how he lived, and how he loved, that you'll actually want to follow him, actually be willing to sacrifice for him, that you'll seek to live as he lived and love as he loved? Thomas wanted proof, and Jesus was able to give it to him. But *blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*.

Blessed are those who trust without evidence. Is that naïve do you think? Let's try a game of trust to see if we can believe without seeing...

Volunteers show that they trust others by leaning backwards if they are promised that they will be caught before they fall to the ground.

Maybe today it is harder for us to trust – to take things on faith – because we are so good at finding tangible – or at least scientific – proof for so many things. We can prove so much with our God-given minds – why not prove God? Prove Jesus? What do you believe without proof? Can you prove someone's love for you or yours for them? We try, but in the end, we must simply trust.

The final two verses sum up the reason that John has written his gospel record – to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ – but not only that, also that *through believing, we may have life in Christ's name*. Our belief in the resurrection of Jesus depends on us trusting the reliability of the witnesses in the New Testament and the witness of Christians in every age who have experienced the risen Christ. We have followed Jesus from life to death and back again. We have heard him teach and preach. We have listened to stories of his healing, and his miracles. We have heard him call us to do likewise again and again. We have heard about God's incredible love for us. The testimony is in. Now is our moment to deliberate and decide.

Do we believe because we see or do we see because we believe? According to St. Augustine, *faith is to believe what we do not see and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe*.

Don't be discouraged by the smug criticisms of those who claim that the spiritual world is not real – those who foolishly deny that God exists – those without faith. Dare to confess Jesus as Lord thankfully, even though you don't have more than the barest inkling of the answers to your own searching questions. Frederick Beuchner writes that doubt is the *ants in the pants* of faith – it keeps faith awake and moving. If we have no questions we have no faith, and many who have no faith are blind to the answers.

To say we believe and yet do nothing would be the most baffling reaction of all. We are called to believe and to act – to believe and to serve – to believe and to love – to believe and to forgive – to believe and to be sent forth.

Dare to celebrate the risen Christ, and the more you dare, the more you will find that in a remarkable way you will be lifted up by the resurrection – lifted beyond the superficial to the lofty and profound joys which Jesus called the state of blessedness. Our task is no small one, but the reward is great: that through believing, we may have life – real life – blessed and abundant life – life worth living, in the name of Christ. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe*. Blessed are you.  
**Amen.**