

*Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”*

*But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”*

<sup>26</sup>*A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”*

<sup>28</sup>*Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”*

<sup>29</sup>*Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:24-29)*

### **My Lord and My God!**

There’s a lot of irony in the Christian faith. It’s ironic that the King that Israel waited fifteen centuries to see was born in a stable. It’s ironic that God would prohibit women from the office of preaching and yet he would choose women to be the first people to announce that Jesus had risen from the grave. It’s ironic that God would create us to be his servants and then send his own Son into this world to serve us. There are many more examples of irony in the Scriptures. We see that irony this morning in our gospel lesson. A man who has gone down in history as “Doubting Thomas” gives us one of the clearest and simplest confessions of faith in Jesus that you will find anywhere. I hope that every one of us echoes his confession this week as we gather around the manger. Thomas said, **“My Lord and my God!”**

#### **I.**

I always feel a little sympathy for Thomas. If God had not recorded this incident, Thomas would be almost anonymous. But these six verses have made him famous as the one disciple who didn’t believe that Jesus had risen. Now, he continued to be a disciple after this. He was there on the day of Pentecost when three thousand people were converted. He was one of the disciples that continued to meet in the temple and were held in awe by the people of Jerusalem – even the unbelievers. If ancient church tradition can be believed, he traveled as far as India with the gospel. But most people don’t remember any of that. What they know about Thomas is this one moment of doubt.

How would you like it if everyone remembered your faults and forgot your contributions? You’d probably want people to understand that there were reasons for the mistakes that you made. And Thomas had good reasons for his disbelief. In fact, disbelief was the only logical position to hold when he heard that the other disciples had seen the Lord. At that moment, the confession he would give a week later – **My Lord and my God** – could only be considered **an impossible confession**.

Consider the evidence. Thomas was there Thursday night when Judas Iscariot led the temple guards to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Luke tells us that **“all those who knew him”** watched his crucifixion from a distance on Friday. That may include the disciples, although they aren’t mentioned by name. But even if he wasn’t there, Thomas knew what had happened. Crowds of people had seen Jesus’ execution. The whole city was full of the news. Thomas knew that Jesus was dead. And dead men don’t come back to life – not while this world lasts.

But Thomas had an even stronger reason to disbelieve the report the other disciples gave him. His nickname was Didymus. Do you know what the word means? It means twin. Thomas was a twin. He probably had a brother somewhere who looked just like him. Who knows? As twins around the world do, they may even have gotten a laugh out of impersonating each other. People had probably mistaken one for the other at various times in their lives. Thomas knew that an eye witness can be deceived. There could’ve been someone who looked like Jesus and had pretended to be Jesus and the other disciples wanted so badly for Jesus to be alive that they believed it.

So Thomas said, **“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”** Thomas reasoned that if Jesus were alive, then he should still be able to see the scars of his crucifixion. Now, was that really true? Does it mean that when our bodies

rise that you will still be able to see the scars of all that we suffered here? Will you still have that appendix scar? Will my grandmother still be missing the finger she lost? I don't think so. But it would appear that he was right about Jesus, at least. Because when the Lord appeared in their midst even though the doors were locked, he showed Thomas those scars. What's important here is that Thomas wanted to see them. He wanted proof that Jesus really had risen. I think we can understand the way he felt. Believing the testimony of the other ten disciples required that he accept something that cannot be true in the world as we know it.

But faith is being certain of things that are impossible. God asked Thomas to believe simply because he heard the good news. Thomas didn't. He was no different than so many people today who simply cannot accept the impossible things of Christianity. God did the impossible to save us. God himself died for us. God himself rose for us. God broke all the rules that apply to life as we know it. And it shouldn't surprise us that people struggle to believe it. Sometimes, we ourselves wish we had proof.

But God doesn't give us proof the way he did for Thomas. Jesus does not appear to us. God works through the gospel – through the testimony of the eyewitnesses passed down to us in his word and he gives us faith. And the natural state of the human heart is to reject that testimony. And not just because it's illogical, but because the Bible says that sinners are God's enemies and that they cannot accept what God says. We were all conceived and born as sinners so unbelief is the natural state of our hearts. No one can change what they're born as. We can't change the color of our skin. We can't change our need for love and companionship. And we can't change the unbelief that we were born with. Even if it made all the sense in the world, it would still be impossible for us to choose to believe that Jesus rose.

That makes us guilty. Unbelief is the only sin that sends people to hell. Jesus died and paid for every sin, even for unbelief. God has forgiven it all. But unbelief refuses that forgiveness. It insists on standing before God on the basis of all that I do and say and think and feel. It insists that if you look at my whole life, there's more good than bad. "No just God can send me to hell!" That unbelief is the root problem of life in this world. It's the cause of all pain and sorrow. It infects our hearts and condemns us to hell.

But Thomas shows us that God conquers our unbelief. Jesus came and showed him those nail marks in his hands. He let Thomas put his hand into his side. And Thomas confessed, "**My Lord and my God!**" Jesus works just as hard for you and for me, to bring about the same confession. The truth is, we don't need him to appear to us physically. Unbelievers like to insist that if Jesus came to them, they would believe. But that isn't true. They would still reject him. The only reason that anyone believes in Jesus, is that God reaches into their hearts through the gospel and changes them. That really is what happened to Thomas. Jesus' enemies also knew that he had risen from the dead. But instead of believing in him, they bribed the guards at the tomb to say that his disciples stole his body while they slept. Just seeing the risen Christ isn't enough. Faith comes from the gospel. For Thomas, seeing his Lord was a dramatic preaching of that gospel.

That gospel message is what makes us believers, too. That message of the baby whose birth we'll celebrate on Wednesday and Thursday, that message of the man who died and rose to take our sins away, that message of life and hope given to us – that is what changes our hearts. Because these words are more than just words. They're more than just a story someone made up. God himself comes in these words, just as surely as he came to Thomas, and he overcame our sin and everything in our hearts that makes it impossible for us to believe. He gives us faith in Jesus.

## II.

And believe it or not, we're better off without the kind of physical proof that people want. When God gives us faith through the gospel, God gives us a singular blessing. We confess what Thomas confessed, "**My Lord and my God!**" And that is a **blessed confession**.

The confession Thomas taught us is wonderfully appropriate for this week. Up until now, maybe you've wondered why we're talking about an Easter story four days before Christmas. It's because of what that confession says. Thomas recognized Jesus for who he really is: God and Lord. Jesus did not disagree with that confession. He didn't correct Thomas or say, "Don't call me God!" He answered, "**Because you have seen me, you have believed.**" Anyone who disagrees with Thomas' confession does not believe in Jesus. To be a Christian means to see Jesus as our Lord and our God.

He is our Lord because he has purchased and won us. We belong to him because he went to the cross for us. He died and rose and freed us from the devil. My friends, we are servants. That's what God made us to be. The devil stole us from God. Being the devil's servants means being slaves to sin and to sinful desires. It

means serving evil and our own egos. It means living in fear of death and dreading pain and suffering. It means going to hell for all eternity. But Jesus freed us from the devil when he made us his servants. He did that by becoming a servant with us and by being the perfect servant in our place. Jesus is our Lord because he died to make us his and not the devil's.

And he is God most high. That's what Christmas is all about. It's the miracle of God taking a true human nature so that he can stand in our place. God humbled himself to suffer what we suffer and to die the death we have coming. God hid himself in the manger and in the man of sorrows who died that horrible, shameful death on the cross. True Christian faith is more than just believing in something, anything, as long as you believe. True Christian faith is trusting in Jesus. And not just in any idea that we call Jesus. It's confessing "My Lord and my God." Jesus is our Savior and God the Son.

The only way that we get that faith is through the gospel in the word and the sacraments. Jesus said to Thomas, "**Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.**" Who do you think he was talking about? He was talking to us. Two thousand years ago while he stood there in that locked room, Jesus also stood here with us today. So he knew us by name. He knew our faith and the faith of every believer of every time and place.

Jesus said that we are blessed when we hear the gospel and believe. What does "blessed" mean? When God blesses us, he is doing something for our good. God gives us our faith. And God loves the faith that he puts in our hearts. God loves to see that faith and he loves us because he sees that faith in us. Because of that faith, God rewards us. He guards and keeps us every day of our life here. No matter what hardships come against us, no matter how difficult life in Michigan becomes in 2009, no matter what losses we experience, Jesus is always working for our good. He does everything to keep our faith alive and to bring us to heaven.

And in heaven, God the Father will reward our faith. When Jesus returns, we will rule with him because of our faith. Now, does that mean that we have earned something by believing? Does it mean that we are better Christians than Thomas was? If we made a decision and chose to believe in Jesus, it would mean that. It would mean that God owed us. But God does not owe us anything. We did not choose to become believers. God came in our baptism, God came in the gospel and he gave us faith. God still comes in the message about Jesus and he still comes in communion and he strengthens our faith. He shapes it and grows it and keeps it alive in all the hardships and difficulties of life. God who does all that then rewards us for the faith he gave us. We can only call that reward one thing: grace, an undeserved gift of his love.

That gift is ours. We have it now. We will have it all this week as we gather to hear the gospel and take communion and have our faith renewed and strengthened. We will have that gift as we kneel before the manger and welcome our newborn King. We will have it for the rest of our lives as God works to give us joy in the gospel, no matter what happens to us. And we will have it when we die and live with him. We will have it when we rise. So we will sing for all eternity to Jesus. Every one of those songs will be beautiful. They will be greater than anything that we can imagine today. But in truth, every one of them will explore this simple theme: My Lord and my God. Amen.