

*On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"<sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

*<sup>21</sup> Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."<sup>22</sup> And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."<sup>23</sup> If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

*<sup>24</sup> 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."*

*<sup>30</sup> Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.<sup>31</sup> But these are written 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 20:19-31)*

### Why was this Written?

This week, my teenage son invented a new word: "proetry." He was reading a book for his English literature class and he declared that the book is made up of proetry. What does he mean by that? It's when a writer is supposedly writing prose, but he uses such flowery language that he seems to think he's writing poetry. Needless to say, my son is not a big fan. When you read a book like that, you wonder, why did he write it like this? In fact, after a while you start to ask, why did he write this book at all? Did he envision a future where high school English teachers would torture students with it? Probably not. But the author probably did have a reason for writing that book. That's true about almost everything you write. If my wife leaves me a note, she's got a purpose. It might be that our anniversary has come and she wants to tell me she loves me. Or it might be that we're out of milk and she needs me to pick some up. But there's a reason why she wrote and that reason dictates what she includes in her message. She almost never starts out, "I love you and I thank God for our lives together and would you get a gallon of milk on the way home?" She could do that. But she usually doesn't. Those two messages don't usually fit into the same writing.

This morning, the apostle John tells us why he wrote his gospel. He isn't telling us his own reason. God gave him the words we read here. God had a purpose in writing this book. It wasn't a biography. John wasn't an official historian putting on paper where the Christian church came from. God had a deeper motive. **Why was this written?**

- I. So that you may believe;** and
- II. So that you may have life.**

#### I.

The account we have before us starts on Easter Sunday evening and ends a week later. It's a compelling narrative. But God didn't record this because he liked a good story. In fact, John tells us that God could've written a lot more. He says that Jesus did many other miracles in the presence of his disciples that John didn't write down. At the end of the next chapter, he says that Jesus did so many things that if they were all written down, John thought that the whole world couldn't hold the books that would be written. But coming back to this chapter, he says, **"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."** So **why was this written? So that you may believe.**

Who is the "you"? It's us! It's every person who would ever read this gospel. God had John write it so that untold millions of people would believe. Believe what, exactly? Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The

Christ means the Anointed One, the Savior that God promised. God kept the promises he made going all the way back to the Garden of Eden. He sent the Savior. But that Messiah wasn't just anybody. He was the Son of God. Now, you couldn't tell that by looking at him, because he came in human flesh. But God sent his Son into the womb of the Virgin Mary and God gave us the only Savior who could actually defeat our sin and our death: God made man.

God wants us to believe all that about Jesus. What does it mean to believe? To trust that what God has said is true. That's the point of the famous story of Doubting Thomas. On the first Easter evening, the disciples gathered in a room someplace. They barred the doors for fear of the Jews. It had been an eventful day. The women had gone to the tomb and found it open. They saw two angels who told them Jesus had risen. Peter and John then raced out to the tomb and found it open, but Jesus they didn't see. Just before the events that took place in this reading, those two disciples who went to the little town of Emmaus and walked and talked with Jesus had raced back and told the disciples the good news. Luke tells us that Jesus had even appeared to Peter. So the message was there and they were beginning to believe it. Then Jesus himself appeared. He didn't break down the barred door. He was simply there. Luke tells us they thought they were seeing a ghost and so Jesus ate something in front of them to demonstrate he had a physical body. The food didn't just fall on the floor. He was truly risen!

Jesus came with a two part message. First he said, **"Peace be with you!"** After the weekend they had had, what did they need? Peace. They needed to know that God was on their side, even after the horror of having their Lord murdered. They needed to know that God was in charge while they hid from the wrath of the people in power. They needed the peace that only comes from God's love and promises. The other part of his message was to share that peace. He breathed on them and gave them the Holy Spirit. He told them, **"If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."** We call that the ministry of the keys and it's the heart of all the work we do.

But that's not the end of the story. John tells us that Thomas wasn't there. He calls Thomas *Didymus*. Didymus is the Greek word for twin. Thomas the twin wasn't there on Easter evening. When the other disciples told him what had happened, Thomas didn't believe them. In fact, he made it clear that the only way that he would believe that Jesus had truly risen would be if he stuck his finger into the marks the nails had made in Jesus' hand and then put his hand into the hole the spear made in Jesus' side on the cross. Why would he insist on actually touching the scars of Jesus' death? Probably because he was a twin. We have a set of twins in kindergarten this year. I baptized them the day they were born. I've watched them grow for five years – and I can't tell them apart. I keep trying to figure it out, but I'm always guessing. When they get a little older and come to catechism class, they could probably take turns learning their memory work then get in line twice and recite it to me twice and say they were the other sister. How would I know for sure? Thomas probably had experience with people mistaking him for his brother. So he wanted to be sure that the other disciples didn't see someone who just looked like Jesus. He wanted to be sure it was the actual man who was crucified, dead and buried.

Thomas did not believe the good news that Jesus had risen. He wanted proof – which goes against the very nature of faith. The Bible tells us that faith is being certain of what we do not see. It takes faith to believe that our loved ones have gone to heaven, because we can't visit them there yet. It takes faith to believe that God loves us and is doing everything for our good, especially when life hurts, because it doesn't look that way in the middle of a crisis. And it takes faith to believe that Jesus died and rose for us because we weren't there. All we get is the message.

Thomas heard the message and he didn't believe it. So Jesus used him to teach us about the importance of trusting God's Word. A week later, the disciples were gathered in that room again. This time Thomas was there. And Jesus came again. He didn't even wait for Thomas to protest. He held out his hands. He showed Thomas his side. Then Jesus said, **"Stop doubting and believe."** And Thomas did. He said, **"My Lord and my God!"** Notice what a tremendous confession of faith that really is. He called Jesus, the human being he had known for three years, Lord and God. He was the Savior we need. But even more, Thomas said *"My Lord and my God."* Thomas acknowledged that Jesus is his Savior. He renounced his doubts. But Jesus did not complement his confession. Instead he said, **"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."** He counted Thomas' faith as real. But he rebuked him for needing proof. He pronounced a blessing on all of us who have not seen and yet have believed.

My friends, all this was written so that we may believe. There is only one path to faith: the good news about Jesus. For two thousand years, the Church has had to live in a world in which it's hard to believe in a Savior who ascended into heaven and left us here to struggle along until we die or he comes back. All our lives, we've had to face the hurts and the hardships that make it hard to trust God's promise that he is doing what's best for us. We've had to suffer under the power of people who can make our lives miserable and trust Jesus' word that he rules all things for our good. We've had to watch the years roll by and our own deaths draw ever closer without a glimpse of heaven. All we have is Jesus' promise. And he says that when we believe that promise, we are indeed blessed.

What does that mean? Heaven will be rich in joy for us – richer, in fact, because we took God at his word. In a sense, that's a reward, because God will bless us for trusting him when all the evidence we could see challenged his promises and the world is full of people who deny his love. But it's not a reward we earned because that faith is not something we choose to have. Left to ourselves, we would be no better than Thomas. But the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and he gives us that faith. He makes us believers. Then we trust and take comfort and cling to Jesus in every hurt and trial, until we see him again. When that day comes, we will be so blessed that God doesn't even describe it to us. Who can understand heaven while they're still here?

## II.

But God does have a new and better life for us. John made that clear when he said, **“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”** Faith isn't a test that God makes us take. It's not a hoop we have to jump through. Faith is a means to an end: eternal life. God wrote the gospel to give us faith. He gives us faith to give us eternal life. **So why was this written? So that you may have life.**

“Life” in John's words doesn't just mean life on this planet. Now, it is true that from the moment we come to faith in Jesus, our lives here are different. In fact, earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus talks about having life to the full. Part of that is finding the true meaning and joy of this life. We are happiest and most content when we live as God created us to be: his servants and his children. When we follow him, when we hear the good news of his love, when we apply his promises to the hurts and sorrows we face here, we serve each other in love, life here is better. And every blessing we enjoy in this life is gift God gives us.

But ultimately, “life” means more. It even means more than going to heaven. Now, we certainly do go to heaven when we die. And when we get there, we will be free from all sin and sorrow and pain and even from the scars of the hurts we faced here. Already in heaven, we will be perfect and we will live in joy with Jesus. But the New Testament only talks about going to heaven occasionally. Instead, the New Testament puts the emphasis on the resurrection. Why? Because Jesus doesn't let the devil win. Sin doesn't get to destroy God's creation. Jesus rebuilds it. Sin doesn't get to destroy these bodies. Old age, disease, accidents and death don't get to ruin the physical life God gave us. We will rise. We will be renewed. We will be made physically perfect and we will live in a new and perfect world forever because Jesus rose from the dead. That is what John means when he says that all this is written so that we may have life in Jesus' name.

Jesus did more than John tells us about. But God had a purpose that determined what he told us about. God tells us about Thomas because it's so easy for us to doubt. We can be just as guilty of wanting proof as he was. That is sin. God should just give up people who don't trust his promises. But instead, God conquers our sin and weakness. Jesus died and paid for it. Jesus rose and forgave it. And Jesus sent the Holy Spirit through the message he gave those disciples and the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and he conquers the unbelief and doubt in our hearts. He wrote all this so that we would believe. He wrote all this so that we will live. Trust that promise! Amen.