

Believing Is Seeing

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, April 12, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [John 20:19-29](#) and [Hebrews 11:1-3](#)

Copyright © 2026 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

I've got a scar on my left knee that's about an inch and a half long. When I was 10, it stuck out and looked like a worm had attached itself to my leg, especially after I'd been swimming long enough to get cold (the scar would turn an interesting shade of purple). I remember exactly how I got it. I was at day camp (I think it was the summer I was 7), and I was running from one activity to another – camp was so much fun I just had to get to the next activity – and I tripped and sliced my knee open. I probably should have been shipped off to a doctor for a half dozen stitches, but I was having too much fun at camp to miss any of it, and the cut was deep enough it didn't hurt. "Just put a band-aid on it," I insisted and I was off to the next activity. In my mind's eye, I can still see the grass where I tripped and feel its texture. I can still see the look of the wound as it was washed out. I can still feel the excitement I felt at being at camp.

Scars tell important parts of our stories. Scars bear witness to the hard things we've been through. Some scars are made early enough in our lives that we don't remember what happened and our parents have to tell us the story. Our belly buttons, for instance. The deep gash on my knee was a hard thing, but not a traumatic thing, to go through. Now, the scar reminds me of the joys of childhood. Some scars bear witness to the traumas we endured, some of which we still carry. I suspect each of you has a scar story or two.

Scars play an important part of today's gospel lesson.

On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene had her early morning encounter with the resurrected Jesus at the tomb, and she come back and told the disciples what happened. And now it's evening. Perhaps the sun has gone down. Out of fear, the disciples are hiding away, behind locked doors when Jesus materializes in the room and says to them the traditional greeting: Shalom. As-salamu alaykum. Peace be with you.

Dead is dead. Who cares that Mary has insisted that Jesus is alive again? Dead is dead. Who cares that the disciples witness Jesus resuscitating Lazarus just a few chapters earlier. Dead is dead. So, who is this guy who offers them peace?

Jesus identifies himself by showing his hands and side. And then he commissions them to carry on his work: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (20:21), and emulating God's act of creating Adam in the second creation story by breathing spirit into the Adam (Gen. 2:7), Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit onto the disciples. One disciple, Thomas, is absent. When he comes back and the other disciples tell him about what happened, Thomas refuses to believe 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" (20:25). For Thomas, seeing is believing.

The following week, Jesus reappears, and this time Thomas is present. Just as he had offered the other disciples, Jesus offers Thomas the opportunity to touch his scars. The fact

that Jesus goes on to praise those who will come to believe without the same evidence does not mean he condemns the early disciples, including Thomas, for desiring it. In fact, I think this is the central thrust of this passage. John (the gospel writer) is calling those of us who only have the testimony of others (and not that tactile experience of touching Jesus' scars) to believe without seeing, or to believe so that we can see.

I think Thomas gets a raw deal because of this passage. If I were to ask you to write down the first word that comes into your mind when I mention a disciple's name, in many cases you'd leave the paper blank. For instance, Thaddeus or Bartholomew or Philip. In other cases, we would probably produce a bunch of difference responses. For instance, Simon. We might get rock (like his nickname Peter), dense, passionate, impulsive, dedicated, human, denier, impetuous, pumpkin eater, homey, larger than life, emotional, intense, forceful, good-hearted, slow-witted. And in a couple cases, I suspect there would be a convergence around one word. For instance, Judas. I suspect that most of you would write down something like "betrayed." Or Thomas. I suspect most of you would write down "doubter."

Thomas is always associated with doubt, and I think that's unfair. This is the guy who, in John's gospel when Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem, a decision that the other disciples think it will lead to certain death for all of them, declares, "Let us all go with the Teacher, so that we may die with him!" (John 11:16). "Courageous Thomas" might be a more appropriate moniker than "Doubting Thomas."

"Sensible Thomas" works, too. Seven days happened between when Jesus appeared to the disciples (but not Thomas) and the next Sunday (when Thomas was there). Seven days. Imagine the suspicion that must have grown in Thomas between the disciples saying that they had encountered the resurrected Jesus and when Thomas had his experience. Seven days without any additional evidence. Seven days of the disciples stuck in limbo, not leaving their gathering place for any significant time even though they had this encounter with the resurrected Jesus who commissioned them, sending them out into the world. Ten days since Jesus' arrest, nine since his execution, and seven days since his stunning after-death visitation, and the disciples have not changed their new routine one whit.¹

Give him the name "Sensible Thomas." And given how today's reading ends, call him "Confessing Thomas."

Yet, the church has given him the moniker "Doubting Thomas." And maybe there's some good news in that moniker for us. Just one week after all the Easter partying, one week after the grand celebrations of the resurrection, the church turns to the subject of doubt. In fact, I find it reassuring that the church turns to the subject of doubt. The resurrection is really the most unlikely of events.

It's unnatural for Jesus to be resurrected. And when the resurrected Christ shows up again, this time with Thomas there, Jesus honors Thomas' need and invites Thomas to reach into his wounds, to touch him. Touch played a vital part in Jesus' ministry. Jesus

¹ Cheryl A. Lindsay, "Weekly Seeds: 'So I Send You'," *Sermon Seeds*, <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/weekly-seeds-so-i-send-you/> (accessed 7 April 2026).

touched the untouchables – the lepers, the blind, the unwhole and impure. And he let others touch him – a woman who has been hemorrhaging for years, a woman who has a reputation who anoints him. And here, Jesus invites Thomas, “Touch me and see. No ghost has flesh and bones like this.”²

The scripture isn’t clear if Thomas touched or not. The renaissance painter Caravaggio seemed to think Thomas did. Perhaps the invitation was enough and Thomas didn’t need to actually stick his fingering into the wounds after all. In any event, Thomas found in that moment the mystical union of life and death, sorrow and joy that we call “the resurrection.”³

Just as Jesus honored Thomas’ doubts, I believe Jesus honors our doubts. But that may be because “doubt is essential to faith,” as author Lesley Hazelton has said. “... Abolish all doubt and what is left is not faith but absolute, heartless conviction. You’re certain that you possess the Truth [with a capital T]... This certainty quickly devolves into dogmatism and righteousness, by which I mean a ... pride in being so very right – in short, the arrogance of fundamentalism.”⁴

Doubt is a part of us we need to cherish. “We have this idea that doubt is somehow imperfect, that there is something wrong with doubt. It is this desire for certainty that I see as so dangerous, this desire for perfectibility. Let’s just let go of perfection. Let’s just accept that we’re human. We’re imperfect. That’s what makes us interesting. That’s what makes the world interesting.”⁵

Think about what it was like for those Jesus followers when John wrote his gospel. It was not only not best of times, in most ways it was some of the worst of times. Doubt must have filled their hearts. “They doubted that Roman persecution would ever end. They doubted that tensions would ever cease between the church and the synagogue. Racial and religious divisions among them left the church doubting their unified identity in Christ.

“The first eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection were long-ago dead. Jesus’ return was long overdue. For these deeply doubting believers, hearing John’s gospel story of Thomas was to hear their story.”⁶

Thomas listened to the disciples’ tall tales of seeing the resurrected Jesus. But why should he believe it just because he heard the story? Why should the early Christians believe any of this resurrection stuff just because they heard the story?

2 Rose Marie Berger, “The Sense of Touch,” Sojourners, <http://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/sense-touch> (accessed 25 April 2014).

3 Kari Jo Verhulst, “Wounds that Reveal Life,” Sojourners, <http://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/wounds-reveal-life> (accessed 25 April 2014).

4 Lesley Hazelton’s TED Talk, “The doubt essential to faith,” http://www.ted.com/talks/lesley_hazleton_the_doubt_essential_to_faith (accessed 26 April 2014).

5 Lesley Hazelton, TED Radio Hour, originally broadcast 18 April 2014, listened to online at <http://www.npr.org/2013/11/18/245949211/believers-and-doubters?showDate=2014-04-18> on 26 April 2014.

6 Nancy Hastings Sehested, “A Shelter of Doubt,” Sojourners, <http://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/shelter-doubt> (accessed 25 April 2014).

Thomas was lucky. Jesus showed up again and give him the chance to see the evidence with his own eyes. Seeing is believing, he thought. His response changes his moniker from “Doubting Thomas” to “Confessing Thomas.” “My Lord and my God!” Thomas exclaimed. Given what things were like when John wrote his gospel, it’s no surprise that John tells us Jesus replied, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

I would say that even more important than coming to believe is coming to have faith. There’s a difference between faith and belief, between faith and conviction. Belief may be a part of faith, but faith is much bigger. You see, faith is much more about relationship that belief is. Faith is about trust and trustworthiness and fidelity. Belief is about mental assent. Faith is about the whole being; belief is about the head only.⁷

Hazelton, who describes herself as an agnostic Jew, puts it this way: Faith and conviction are in two separate spheres. “The people I know of deepest faith are not convinced. They have faith despite their doubt, in fact because of their doubts. It’s a dance, and they’re very, very aware of this and it goes beyond ‘belief in.’ They know that this is not rational and yet they commitment themselves. And it’s that act of commitment, that existential act of commitment that I so admire.”⁸

When I read today’s gospel lesson weeks ago, I thought about how, for Thomas, seeing was believing. And I thought about how John tells us the story so that we can shift to a new way of seeing, so that we can see because of belief, that believing is seeing.

But I think it takes more than belief to see with resurrection vision. I think it takes faith, and faith that embraces doubts and commits anyway. The sermon title for today really should be “Faithing Is Seeing.”

I like the way Lauren Winner put it: “Some days I am not sure if my faith is riddled with doubt, or whether, graciously, my doubt is riddled with faith. And yet I continue to live in a world the way a religious person lives in the world; I keep living in a world that I know to be enchanted, and not left alone. I doubt; I am uncertain; I am restless, prone to wander. And yet glimmers of holy keep interrupting my gaze.”⁹

May our eyes always be open to the holy interruptions of our gaze. And may our faith grow as our doubts bloom. Amen.

7 This point of view is influenced very heavily by Marcus Borg. See, for instance, his chapter “Faith” in *The Heart of Christianity*.

8 Lesley Hazelton on the TED Radio Hour, *op. cit.*

9 Lauren Winner, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, quoted in a email from Brenda Loreman, dated 23 April 2014.