

BELIEVE (John 20:19-31, Easter 2A)

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/believe/>

In the fall of 2020, the American sports comedy-drama, Ted Lasso, debuted on Apple TV and quickly became a fan favorite, winning four Emmy awards after its first season and seven after its second.

Ted Lasso, an American college football coach, is hired by a British soccer team owner to coach her premiere team, AFC Richmond. The problem is Ted Lasso doesn't know a thing about soccer. Throughout the entire first season, he is learning the rules. He may not know soccer, but he knows people and believes in them. Though everyone underestimates him, Ted leads the team to profound growth and some athletic success. To the aging and injured former star, he is loyal and understanding. He gives gentle lessons in humility to the upstart, truly gifted but hot-headed star. When he consults the lowly and picked-on equipment manager for strategy, he shares and gives power to one who is neglected and overlooked.

Ted's charm, personality, humor, and folksy optimism eventually win nearly everyone over. But the local Richmond fans take the longest. The first season is full of constant insults, as only the British do so well. They want to win, and kindness and compassion don't win games.

But for Lasso, winning is not the point. As he says to a journalist in the show, "Success is not about the wins and losses. It's about helping these young players be the best versions of themselves on and off the field. And it ain't always easy, but neither is growing up without someone believing in you."

At the end of the first episode, Ted hangs a handmade sign like this one in the locker room over the door. A sign with one word – BELIEVE. This captures what Ted Lasso is all about. He believes in people. He's surrounded by people who do not believe in him or themselves, and Ted sometimes struggles to believe in himself. Still, he marches on, continuing to believe even when others don't, hoping one day they'll believe in themselves, too. The poster becomes a beloved character in the show, making you want to walk into that locker room, jump in the air, and high-five it.

But believing isn't easy. It is easy to say, but another thing to actually believe.

We've probably all had someone tell us when we doubt ourselves or the unknown future ahead of us, "You just have to believe." I always want to respond, "Oh, wow. Thank you. I wish I had thought about that. Just believe. Of course!"

Believing is hard whether you are a losing British soccer team, a 21st-century individual in a culture full of skepticism, or a close disciple of Jesus in the days after his death on the cross.

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, we looked at Mary Magdalene's encounter with the Risen Christ at the empty tomb. She had first gone in the dark of morning, found the tomb empty, and ran to tell the disciples. Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the tomb with Mary on their heels. Seeing the tomb empty as she said, the men went home, but Mary remains at the tomb, in the garden, weeping, when Jesus appears, and calls her by name, and she believes. She returns to the disciples and proclaims, "I have seen the Lord." And tells them what Jesus said to her.

In our text today, Jesus appears to some of his disciples while they are hiding in fear, and then a week later, Jesus appears in the same room to disciples and Thomas, one of the twelve. We don't know exactly who was among each gathering. Scripture doesn't say. The only difference between the two appearances is Thomas. He isn't in the first appearance, but he is the second, and this has forever shaped his reputation, and not in a fair way, if I'm being honest.

Have you or someone you've known ever had a nickname that stuck and that you didn't like but couldn't shake? NBA champion Earvin (Magic) Johnson was first dubbed "Magic" while playing high school football as a 15-year-old. After his crazy success on the field, a local sports reporter gave him the moniker "magic." But Earvin's devout Christian mom protested because she said it was sacrilegious. Well, 49 years later, much to her disappointment, everyone still calls him Magic. The nickname stuck.

Somewhere along the way, Thomas, the Twin, was labeled "Doubting Thomas," and it stuck. In fact, the phrase "Doubting Thomas" has come to mean any skeptic who refuses to believe without direct personal experience. You may have heard someone in a movie or TV show tell someone not to be such a doubting Thomas. It comes from this story.

But there is more to the story of Thomas. He isn't mentioned often in the scriptures, even though he was one of the 12 disciples, but his brief appearances are far from someone who is, by nature, skeptical. In fact, he was devoted and occasionally outspoken. When Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that Lazarus was sick, the religious authorities already sought to do Jesus harm. It would be risky for Jesus and his followers to travel to Lazarus' home near Jerusalem. But, when Jesus insisted on going, it was Thomas who declared his willingness to join him, even if it meant death. (John 11:6)

Thomas loved Jesus, followed Jesus, grieved Jesus, and wanted to believe Jesus was alive. But it was hard to believe that death was not the end of the dream and the end of this One whom Thomas loved. Yes, he had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, but this felt different.

We don't know why Thomas wasn't in the room the first time Jesus appeared. Maybe he drew the short straw and had to go pick up pizza. Perhaps he had gone out of town after Jesus's death. For whatever reason, he missed it, but he heard about it.

Can't you hear the other disciples who had seen Jesus? "Thomas, you will not believe it. We have seen the Lord. The doors were locked, but he appeared right here among us in this very room. He

said, "Peace be with you," and showed us his hands and side. And then told us again to have peace and that we are being sent just as the Father sent him. Then, he breathed on us, telling us to receive the Holy Spirit and forgive sins. Thomas, we have seen the Lord!"

What a time to be gone. Thomas hears what they are saying. He knows these people, knows they wouldn't make this up, yet he needs to experience it for himself. We give Thomas such a hard time about this, but you know some of you struggle to believe when your spouse or child says they locked the front door or turned off the stove, and you still go back to double-check because you have to see it yourself to believe, even if they've never failed to do it before. And that is just a locked door, not a risen Lord.

Thomas is asking for what the others experienced. Jesus offered up his hands and his side to the first group. Thomas asks for the same and then some, to touch the scars. It is a question for us to consider, "what would it have taken to convince us Jesus had truly risen from the dead?" Would it be enough that our trusted Christian community said it had happened to them for us to believe? Or would we, like Thomas, ask to see and touch Jesus' scars for ourselves?

A week later, Jesus again appeared among his disciples without bothering to open the closed door, but Thomas was with them this time. Jesus invites Thomas to do the very thing Thomas requested to believe – touch his scars. Jesus says to touch them and do not be unbelieving any more but believe. Scripture doesn't tell us if Thomas touched him or not. The next words are Thomas's powerful declaration, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas is unbelieving no more. He believes Jesus is alive. He believes what the community told him about their experience with Jesus. He believes for himself. Jesus says you believe because you have seen, Thomas.

Which is good. Really good. But you know what is better, Jesus says? Then, Jesus turns to the camera and looks across the ages and says, "People who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus is talking about you and me.

I love the TV show, *The Office*. One of my favorite things about it is how the characters turn and look at the camera, the audience, at random moments. It invites you in, and you feel like you are part of the story. This is what happens at the end of chapter 20 when it moves from doubting Thomas to doubting readers, like those early followers of the Way and eventually us. The narrator tells us Jesus did and said much that was not recorded, but the things were written "so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have life in his name." (v.31) At the time of the writing of this gospel, maybe 30-40 years after Jesus, the people who were eyewitnesses were beginning to die. When it became clear that Jesus was not returning as soon as they thought or hoped, they began to write down these accounts for those who would come behind them. John tells the listeners he is writing these things so they will continue to believe, and that those who come behind who will not see will believe.

Billions since then fit this category. We have not seen it, yet we believe. But it isn't always easy. And some days, it might not even be true.

According to the scripture, a week passed between when Jesus appeared the first group of disciples and when Jesus appeared again to them and Thomas. Thomas had to wait a week, and I've often wondered what those days were like for him. I imagine he felt like the odd man out. I imagine he had moments of envy and hurt that they saw Jesus and he didn't. I imagine him volunteering for errands or going up to the rooftop to escape their constant retellings of seeing Jesus again, about what his scars looked like, repeating what Jesus said over and over again.

I imagine some of us can relate. Some of us today are in that week of waiting. We've had our moments with Jesus and believed in him. But, for whatever reason, lately, he seems like he left and is nowhere to be found. Or maybe, Jesus feels dead to you. Maybe your doubts have grown, your beliefs have been challenged, or you've heard something that makes you question what you've always believed. You look around at those you love and trust or those gathered here today, and they seem to be still experiencing Jesus. They seem to easily believe or have stories to tell of Jesus at work. And to be honest, you want that for yourself. You've asked for Jesus to show up for you, yet you sit here, still waiting.

The story of Thomas doubting the resurrection of Jesus reminds us about the moments in our lives when our faith is shaken. The violence surrounding us, the deaths of innocent lives, the loss of life and livelihoods, increase in poverty because of economic uncertainties, depression and mental illness, - all of these create uncertainties and fear in us.

I think one of the promising things in today's story is that Jesus met Thomas right where he was, amid his doubts and questions. Yes, he showed up physically for Thomas and let him see and touch his wounds, and we wish we also had a chance to do the same. But we can't. We're invited to believe without seeing. We're invited to practice believing, trusting those who have come before us, trusting what Jesus said and did, and trusting those in our faith community who give their testimonies of faith in Jesus. We're invited to believe even without all the answers, because we will never have all the answers.

Doubt is a normal part of us. As theologian, Frederick Buechner wrote, "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith: they keep it awake and moving."ⁱ Doubt pushes us and challenges us. A faith that is untested, unquestioned, and undoubted is likely one without deep roots.

The older I get and the more I study scripture and my faith, the more questions I have. Most of the time, I like it this way, preferring the wonder and mystery of God over the small box I had God in. But some days, I long for the black-and-white answers of my past because it was easier.

Author and seminary professor, Tony Cartledge, wrote about a time he was working on his Ph.D. at Duke University, and he submitted an assignment to interpret a text from Ecclesiastes in the Bible

and use it as a basis for a sermon. In the paper, he wrote that because of the New Testament witness, we can *know* there is a life beyond, we can *know* how to get there, we can *know* our eternity is sure. In every sentence, his professor, Father Roland Murphy, took a red pen and marked through the word "know" and replaced it with "believe."

Tony said, "He forced me to confront my own arrogance, and that experience became a pivotal step in my faith development Like Thomas, we can't know everything we want to know. What we can know is Jesus. We can't see Jesus, nor can we touch him, as Thomas did But we can enter a relationship with Jesus. It is not a knowing that we can prove to anyone else, because it is not an empirical thing but an experiential one."ⁱⁱ

Ted Lasso wants us to believe in ourselves and in each other. And our world would be better if we did this more, if we championed one another, believed in, and brought out the best in ourselves and those around us. Ted believes in his team. Even though they can't see what he sees, he lives it out for them. They watch his life and see it is true for him, and without evidence they can see or touch, they experience the impact of believing. And it changes them.

The Gospel of John invites us to believe in Jesus. Not because we have seen Jesus as Thomas did, but because we, like Thomas, find Jesus seeing us, meeting us right where we are, doubts and all, showing us the wounds of love in unpredictable ways. As Diana Butler Bass wrote, "the story of Thomas invites us to see the unpredictable Jesus, who shows up at dinner tables, during long walks, and on a fishing trip. There's no rhyme or reason to any of it, except that whenever he appears, his friends know joy and surprise and wonder anew. They are changed forever."ⁱⁱⁱ

This room is full of those who have come to believe and are changed forever. We did not see or touch. We were not there. We heard. Someone told us the story. Someone showed us the change Jesus made in their life. There was a sermon, a scripture, a prayer, or a story. We heard and came to believe in Jesus for ourselves through the work of God's Spirit in our lives and the lives of others.

John's Gospel wants us to believe in Jesus and the community of faith. The disciples should have believed Mary, but they didn't, according to the Gospel of Mark. Thomas should have believed the disciples, but he didn't. I think when Jesus questions Thomas's unbelieving, it is not just about not believing Jesus is alive but also about not believing what the faith community had told him about experiencing Jesus. Do not be unbelieving, Thomas, but believe.

We can have greater faith and courage because we trust Thomas and the others saw Jesus on our behalf. The gospel writer hopes that by hearing all the stories he wrote about what Jesus said and did and by the stories of those who saw Jesus and believed, we will believe, too, even with our questions and doubts. The question is, will we? Will we believe?

ⁱ F. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, Harper & Row, 1973, 20.

ⁱⁱ T. Cartledge, 147.

ⁱⁱⁱ https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-musings-973?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email