

“Believe or trust?” John 20:19-31

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

There are many strange ideas in the world about what Christianity is, what the Church is, what it means to be a Christian. The world, or we can say – the flesh cannot understand spiritual things. That’s how it is...

For example, you probably have met people who think that being a Christian means that you believe all sorts of fairy tales and weird stories from that ancient book, the Bible, which was written just by men.

Others may think that Christians are those who still live without the light of scientific discoveries, naïve and superstitious. Or that Christians just use God as explanation to anything they don’t know or can’t understand about the nature.

How much of this is true? Do we, indeed, believe in fairy tales? Is it really what being a Christian means, that we just blindly believe that which we can’t know or understand? Or is there something else to being a Christian?

Our today’s reading will help us to reflect on these questions and hopefully to come up with some good answers. Already the last Sunday we reflected on how hard it was even to the closest of Jesus’ disciples to believe that He has risen.

Jesus had been fore-telling it again and again, but when He was crucified, died and on the third day was raised from the dead, they still couldn’t believe. Our today’s text reveals the same truth. Even if Mary Magdalene had gone to the disciples and told them everything that she had just witnessed, they didn’t believe her. They were still hiding behind closed door when Jesus suddenly stood in their midst. Obviously even that wasn’t enough, as He had to convince

that that was, indeed, Him, by letting them see His nail pierced hands and His side. Only then they believed and finally burst out in joy.

But one was missing among them... Who was it? Yes, Thomas was missing. He was no different than others. He too wouldn't believe the message, even if Jesus had foretold it, even if it was spoken by his trusted fellow-disciples, unless He had seen Jesus Himself and had himself examined Jesus' hands and side.

Came the next Sunday. They were again together and Jesus again appeared among them and right away He spoke to Thomas. Jesus obviously knew His doubts and He had come to assure Thomas that He has indeed risen. Thomas sees, he believes, he speaks his wonderful confession and worships Jesus.

It is true, that the fact of Jesus' resurrection was as unbelievable then as it is today. For such things just don't happen. As John so well describes it, the disciples couldn't believe it either, until Jesus Himself convinced them beyond any doubt that He has risen, that He is alive, and will remain forever.

As we know Jesus kept appearing to the select people again and again, and He did it so that the fact of His bodily resurrection would be established so firmly, and by so many eyewitnesses that there was no reasonable a way to deny it.

As we know, the disciples knew what they had witnessed and went telling the truth in Jerusalem, despite threats from the leaders, and then to all the nations sharing what they had seen and experienced and they wouldn't back off, even as they all had to die for their unbelievable testimonies.

So, is this what being a Christian means? To believe that these events really took place as the Bible tells them? Is that all? No, that is not all at all. That is just a beginning of what it means to be a Christian.

History is very important. To believe that those events, and especially the bodily resurrection of Jesus, took place exactly as the Bible tells us, is important and is a part of what it means to be a Christian.

One can't be much of a Christian if they actually don't believe that Jesus Christ has risen, or that our God has acted in history, before the eyes of hundreds and sometimes thousands of eyewitnesses. But this is just a beginning.

To be a Christian doesn't end with believing that the Bible is historically accurate. Believing what the Bible reveals and knowing what the true God has done in our history simply prepares the ground for what is the most important aspect of being a Christian.

You see, someone, who has carefully studied Biblical history would come to the conclusion that, indeed, the events recorded in the Bible are true and historically accurate. Would that make him a Christian? Of course, not. Knowing the content of the Bible and believing its historicity is not enough. It is necessary, but not enough. People may know the content of the Bible and even belong to a church and worship regularly, but that doesn't yet make them Christians.

Then what else is needed? What else does God expect from us? And here dear Thomas helps us out. He did something special. His testimony is something special. What did Thomas say when he saw Jesus? “My Lord and my God”. But what did Thomas see when Jesus stood before Him?

Did Thomas see God? No, he saw Jesus. Risen, yes. Different, yes. Hard to believe unless you see Him, yes. But he didn’t see God, he saw Jesus, crucified and risen. And this is where we can see how special is Thomas’ testimony.

Even as he saw Jesus, the true man, he not only believed that Jesus has risen, for that was obvious, – finally he also trusted Jesus’ words, that He was the Son of God, true God and true man. This is not what his eyes saw, this is what His faith and trust in Jesus’ words revealed him. “My Lord and my God.” Finally, he trusted Jesus’ words...

And listen how Jesus replied. And this is very important for us. **“You believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”** What is going on here? What does this mean?

Is Jesus encouraging blind faith? Don’t question, just believe! No, not at all. Here we can see what Jesus truly expects from us and what makes someone a Christian. Yes, Jesus appeared to many after His resurrection, and many times, to assure beyond the doubt that He has risen before He returned to the Father.

And that was necessary to establish the truth of His resurrection for our sake, because Jesus was to depart and to return to His Father, and the others wouldn’t have this opportunity to touch Him, to examine His scars, and to eat with Him.

But what He expected from His disciples then and what He expects from all His followers now is – trust. Trusting Him and what He says. Trusting His words. Trusting the Word. The Word of God. The message of God.

Trusting the Word when it reveals our sin, whatever unpleasant it may be, and trusting the Word when it brings God’s grace and forgiveness, whatever unbelievable and undeserved it may appear.

Trusting Jesus, trusting the true God as a person, even if we can’t possibly test or check everything that He says to us. It is about personal trust filled relationships between Him and us. Between Him and you.

It is not just about believing that there is a god, or even that Jesus has risen, or participating in church activities. No, we are invited to go far beyond that. The eternal God opens before us doors that leads us into His very presence. “Trust in me, I am your Lord and your God. Expect from me all good things and run to me in all your trouble.

Converse with me, listen to me, learn from me, let me make you wise, let me bless you, let me bring you closer to me. Be honest with me, turn to me whatever happens, whatever you have done or failed to do, trust in my promises and allow me to be your Lord and your God, for you are created to be loved by me, now come and receive it!”

Think about this. Imagine you have a child or a person that is important to you. Imagine that they would know all the facts of your life, and that they would believe that they are true. But they really wouldn't care about you.

Wouldn't want to be with you, to listen to you, to converse with you, they wouldn't be honest with you, would ignore you, and perhaps would only ask something from you when they were in a big trouble, and then would blame you when something goes terribly wrong – would that be a great relationship?

Our God, and our Lord desires to give us much more than we can imagine or comprehend. Infinitely more. He invites us to experience what divine love is like. He invites you to trust Him, His words, so that you too may know the truth.

See, our God has revealed Himself so much in our history and asked His people to write it down in this little library that we know as the Bible, so that we can be assured that we can trust Him, even if we haven't seen all these events with our own eyes and couldn't be present in them.

The Bible is like our God's track record of promises fulfilled, where you can go and see that He is faithful God, slow to anger and abundant in steadfast love. And this God invites you with open arms to trust in Him, to trust in what He speaks to you in His Word, for He desires to be with you and bless you.

To be a Christian is to respond to God, who comes to you, the same way that Thomas did: "You are my Lord and my God!" Meaning, that we trust that He is our Creator, that He created us and everything in creation to provide for us, and that He gives us our daily bread.

It means that you trust that Jesus is your Redeemer, that He was born, suffered, died and rose again for you, to save you from sin and death and eternal separation from God, and to bring you into His Kingdom, into His family.

That the Holy Spirit has called you, keeps enlightening you with His gifts and will raise you in new resurrected body to live with this wonderful God forever. And all of this He does out of His divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness in us. And for this we owe it to Him to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

We are to say it in morning and in evening together with Thomas and multitudes of God's saints: "You are my Lord and my God". We are to spend our entire lives joyfully trying to please Him for everything that He has done for us, until the day comes, when "every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him."

Until that day, I pray that we would never cease trusting Jesus and His words and witnessing as boldly as the apostles did, so that everyone, all the people in our lives, can hear and believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, our Lord and our God, and that by believing they may have life in His name.

Amen.