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A Great Challenge

John 20:24-28

Intro: What is true faith? What's the basic element of effective faith? What is it that constitutes a real, saving faith? These are important questions today because our world is taken with the idea of faith. In fact, there was a book written in 1926 by Lewis Browne on this subject of faith called *This Believing World*. It was a quite a popular book, having gone through more than 30 editions. It was popular because it proposed a popular thesis - that throughout the world, under all kinds of conditions, people are naturally believers and are addicted to declaring their convictions.

I would have to say that in a general sense, I whole-heartily agree with this thesis. The world is not opposed to the concept of faith and just a few minutes exposure to social media will show that most people have zero hesitation when it comes to stating their opinions or convictions, no matter how wrong or counter-productive they may be. This phenomena is not restricted to social media either. It is glaringly present in politics, business, sports, etc. People, by and large, have no problem telling you what they think, especially if they think you are wrong.

Worse than this is the false concept that as long as I have faith, I'm good; as long as I believe something, I'll be OK. But, businesses fail everyday because management believes they are moving in the right direction, but they're not. Auto accidents happen everyday because drivers believe they can make the light or hold the turn or can answer that text, but they can't. Hundreds of people every year believe they will make it home from work but they don't. Clearly, believing something to be true does not make it true but often times the believer doesn't realize this until it's too late.

The world's concept of faith may be accurate in a general sense but it's completely contrary to the kind of faith that is required in biblical Christianity. True Christianity requires a faith in God as He has been revealed by Jesus Christ. This faith includes accepting the reality of our deep spiritual bankruptcy and recognizing that Jesus provides salvation from sin by His sacrificial death only. It involves a faith in Jesus, an acceptance of the entire scope of His work and teaching as being not just true, but even applicable to

our lives as evidenced by the resurrection.

In light of this definition, is this a believing world? No, it's the exact opposite! This world is totally disbelieving and remains so unless and until God brings faith out of non-faith, just as He is able to bring life out of death and all of Creation out of nothing. Of course, this is exactly what God does. He creates and loves and even dies so that those He has made, who have fallen into sin, might be redeemed. Not only that, He also leads them into faith, producing in them what they could never produce themselves. This is the focus of today's text, the true climax of John's Gospel.

24-25 – This story is about Thomas' first meeting with Jesus, 8 days after His resurrection. We've been studying the Lord's first appearance to the disciples on the day of His resurrection. The problem was, Thomas wasn't there! We're not told why Thomas was missing and Thomas is not criticized for his absence. Regardless of the reason, Thomas was still at a loss, he'd missed out on something and his friends wanted to remedy that. "We have seen the Lord."

Jesus had appeared in the midst of their discouragement and fear and He had declared Peace to them. He revealed His confidence in them by commissioning them to carry on His work throughout the world and He gave them the great consolation of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives to enable them to accomplish their Gospel mission.

Thomas had missed out on all of this: he missed seeing Jesus and missed hearing His words of comfort, confidence and consolation. Thomas had to endure another week of fear and unbelief when he could have had joy and peace!

Now, we can only surmise why Thomas failed to be present at that first meeting with the risen Savior but we get an idea of his attitude in his response to the news of Jesus' appearance. When the others relay their exciting news to Thomas, instead of rejoicing, they are met with a stubborn unbelief! In the Greek, the verb tense for said means they kept saying to him that they have seen Jesus Christ alive but Thomas refused to believe. Think of that – here were literal eye witnesses, not just the other 10 but probably the Emmaus disciples, the women that went to the tomb, maybe even Mary Magdalene. Each had a personal experience with the risen Lord but Thomas wasn't buying any of it. In fact, he demands both visual and

physical proof of life before he will believe. It's significant that no one else in the entire NT makes demands like this before believing in Jesus Christ.

It's from this story that we get the saying "a doubting Thomas" but that title is not accurate on several layers. We can't hang this moniker on Thomas alone because none of the other disciples believed either until Jesus revealed himself to them the week before. But, Thomas' problem was doubt. Jesus didn't rebuke Thomas for his doubts. He rebuked Thomas for unbelief. Doubt is often an intellectual problem: we want to believe but our faith is overwhelmed by problems and questions. Unbelief is a moral problem: we simply will not believe. Doubt says, "I cannot believe! There are too many problems." Unbelief says, "I will not believe unless you provide the evidence I ask for!"

Despite his current situation, we must not think the Thomas was lacking in courage, loyalty or devotion to Jesus. But it does appear that Thomas did have a gloomy disposition. Back in [ch11](#), Jesus and the 12 were ministering in Galilee because the Jews in Judea were gunning for Jesus. When Jesus suggested that they return to Judea to go see Lazarus in his illness, the others were a bit hesitant to jump on that band wagon. Finally, when they saw that Jesus was resolved to return, Thomas quipped, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" ([11:16](#)). Whoa! Why'd you have to go there? Being a little bit of a Debbie Downer, aren't you? But that's Thomas, always looking on the darker side of things. After witnessing the tragedy of the cross, he couldn't imagine any scenario that changed the outcome. In light of this, it's not surprising his final declaration is a double negative in the Greek, "I positively will not believe!"

What is surprising is that, despite his staunch, stubborn unbelief, Jesus still appears to Thomas for the purpose of leading him to faith. Jesus graciously stoops to Thomas' level of experience to lift him up to where he needed to be.

Before we move on to Jesus' conversation with Thomas, we should consider an important aspect of this story. Even before Jesus came to Thomas, the others went to him with the news that Jesus was alive and it was clearly because of their witness, even though it wasn't believed, that Thomas was with them when Jesus appeared the 2nd Sunday.

This is significant because there are many Christians who hold the belief that since humanity is hopelessly lost and only God can save the, there's little or nothing we can do. Thus, at the first sign of resistance to the gospel message, they tend to give up. "There's nothing we can do, it's up to God now." Well, in one since they're correct, it's always up to God even when the outcome is good. But, just because humanity is lost in unbelief and only God can save them is no excuse for us to do nothing. No, we should do what these disciples did. We should seek out the one who is missing. We must go to them and call them to faith. We must tell them, "The Lord is risen. We have seen Him. Come with us and believe!"

If we could be a fly on the wall after that first Sunday night meeting, what would we have heard when the talk turned to missing Thomas? I'm sure someone said, "We've got to tell Thomas about this!" I wonder if someone else said, "Nah, that's his tough luck. He should've been here." I wonder if they went to Thomas and said, "Hey man, you really missed out last Sunday night. Jesus was there and you weren't so you better straighten up and fly right!" They could have said this but they didn't. They were so filled with joy in knowing Jesus was alive that they wanted to tell everyone, especially those who had been with Him during His earthly ministry. Thomas was their first thought and they sought him out and made sure he was with them when they gathered to worship on that 2nd Sunday evening.

26-27 Of course, even though they were concerned for Thomas, the disciples couldn't change his mind, they couldn't make him believe. Just like we can't change the minds of other people or make them believe: God must do that and that's what Jesus does here; He appears to His unbelieving disciple and leads him to faith. He did it by inviting Thomas to perform his test. Jesus had heard Thomas' words (25); no one had to report it to Him. Thomas was asking for something he had no right to ask for. To treat the risen Lord that way would be highly irreverent. Plus, in presenting the test, Thomas implied that it would be impossible so, he had no intention of believing. Thomas was unquestionably out of line here, completely faithless. Yet, Jesus came down to his level, as He always does, and invited him to believe!

How gracious is our God! We have no right to demand anything from Him and yet, the One who's created us and died to save us doesn't hesitate to stoop down to our level to provide what we need. Do you need evidence? If

you will approach the issue honestly, you will discover all the proof you need of His deity, the sufficiency of His death for sin, the reality of His resurrection and the immanency of His promised return. The evidence will be overwhelming. Many a believer started out as a skeptic trying to disprove the Bible only to discover that they have spent all their resistance on Someone they can't resist. If you truly and honestly want to know God, He will reveal Himself to you. God is far more anxious to reveal himself to you than you are in finding Him

What was it that convinced Thomas? It's interesting that the thing that convinced him was not the required test he had demanded. He said he had to put his fingers into the nail holes and thrust his hand into His wounded side and Jesus invited him to do just that – but John doesn't record Thomas doing any of those things. He was convinced without any of these assurances. He came to faith and delivered the greatest testimony of faith recorded in any of the Gospels. But, what was it that actually convinced him?

Some suggest it was Jesus' knowledge of what Thomas had said, though He hadn't physically been present when Thomas said it. To do that, Jesus would've had to be God. But logical as this is, I doubt Thomas had the presence of mind to think through all of that in the moment. No, what finally got through to Thomas was the actual presence of Jesus, identified by the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. At the sight of Jesus all his doubts vanished and he didn't need to apply any of his tests. It was the Christ of the cross who reached Thomas.

That's the most convincing proof of all: the love of Jesus revealed in His wounds. His wounds continually prove the truth of the Gospel message, prove the truth of our salvation. No human author, poet or philosopher could have ever dreamed up the concept of incarnate Deity but it is precisely that which convinces us of His love for us, the idea of a God who lived, bled and died in human form – instead of guilty man – that's the Gospel's own best witness. Some may have intellectual questions about Christianity and God will provide intellectual answers but what ultimately leads people to faith is not reasoned arguments but the love of Jesus Christ demonstrated by His death for them.

28 – Here is the big pay off, an encouraging turn of events! Thomas refused

to believe; he was adamantly stubborn in his unbelief. But, when Jesus revealed Himself to him, Thomas instantly moved from unbelief to faith and proved it by delivering the greatest testimony of faith recorded in all the Gospels: “My Lord and My God!” “Lord” was sometimes used of Jesus by others, usually with less than its full meaning. Here, though, it has all the content it can bear—“Jehovah, Master, Sovereign.” “God” is a new form of address; no one had addressed Jesus this way before. It points to a great insight of faith, maybe even greater than Peter’s confession in [Matt 16:13-17](#). The instant Thomas saw that Jesus was in fact risen from the dead, he immediately understood what that implied. Mere men do not rise from the dead this way. The One who was so obviously alive, although He had died, could now be addressed in the language of adoring worship

To make this statement even more significant, Thomas adds the personal pronoun, saying, “My Lord and my God.” It wasn’t enough that Jesus be both God and sovereign. He was now to be that for Thomas personally. This is the high point of the Gospel. It’s the climax that John has been leading us to. He shows us here how one who began as a great unbeliever came by the grace of God to that confession with which the Gospel began: “And the Word was God” ([John 1:1](#)). In fact, the very reason this book was written was to lead people to this very conviction ([30-31](#)).

What is the significance of Thomas’ story? For the unbeliever, we must always remember that no case is hopeless!

God took a pagan Abraham and made him into a pillar of faith and the father of His people. He took a stammering Moses and made him into a great vehicle for the communicating God’s Word. He made a shepherd boy into a king; a weak Peter into “the rock”; John the Son of Thunder into the apostle of love; Paul, the persecutor of Christians, into a faithful ambassador and martyr. He can do that for anyone, He can do that for you. Let Him to do it. Believe on Him

For the Christian, Thomas’ story reminds us that even in our faith, unbelief robs us of blessings and opportunities. “But I believe in Jesus; I’ve accepted Him!” That’s just the first step of faith. The Christian life is just one long series of discovering truth about God and submitting to it; of finding out what God is like and what He expects and then allowing the Holy Spirit to create that reality in our lives. That means we have to surrender a certain amount of control, of self-determination. That means when we discover our God-

given responsibilities as His children, we embrace them, we ask God for the power and enablement to accomplish them through the work of the Holy Spirit and we make them part of our lives.

We don't ignore our responsibilities and we certainly don't run from them. To do so would be the equivalent of Thomas' stubborn unbelief. The challenge here is great: to move from unbelief to faith!

The truth is everybody lives by faith. The difference is in the object of their faith. Christians put their faith in Jesus Christ and in the truths, the principles and the instructions of God's Word. Everyone else puts faith in themselves. Only one of these options secures salvation. Only one brings spiritual maturity into your life and makes you truly effective for the kingdom of God.

