

A GLIMPSE OF GLORY
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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John 20:19-31

Not only do we have the text from John today, but we have a picture on the back of the bulletin—a painting by the 16th-century Italian artist Caravaggio of “Doubting Thomas.” Caravaggio was known for using ordinary people as the models for his paintings¹, and even though our reproduction is not very good, you can probably tell that Thomas looks like he could be a farmer up at Fly. His face is full of concentration as he tentatively puts his finger into the wound in the side of the risen Christ.

If you think this portrayal is a little too graphic and a little too grisly to display in church, then I apologize. No offense is intended. It is an earthly and earthy picture—a very human Jesus with a very real wound to his very real body. This is incarnation—putting on flesh—at its most graphic. Maybe we’re a little put off by the idea of sticking a finger into such a wound.

But there’s something else. Along with the slight repulsion which such a painting causes, there is something else. It’s something like, well, envy. I envy Thomas here. Here he is, having this sort of intimate contact with the risen Christ. Surely after this Thomas will doubt no more. How could he? This is the risen Christ, standing visible before this one who had doubts, his wounds still visible and available for inspection. Can you tell that the hand of Jesus is even guiding Thomas’s hand to the wound? Jesus wants him to touch it. He wants him to know that he is real and alive and risen from the dead.

I’d believe it, wouldn’t you? If the real, risen Lord were standing right before us, we’d believe. But we were not there. We do not have the tangible, touchable Jesus before us. Thomas saw the risen Christ, but we have not seen. That is why Jesus says to him:

¹ Germain Bazin, *A History of Art*. (New York: Bonanza Books, 1959), p. 301.

“Have you believed because you have seen me, Thomas? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

This is the second Sunday of Easter, the season where we celebrate the risen Lord. But we do so without the evidence that convinced Thomas. We’re challenged to believe in a risen Lord without his tangible presence before us. Wouldn’t it be nice if we had that sort of evidence? Wouldn’t it be nice if Jesus were right in front of us to prove his resurrection? Why doesn’t Jesus make it easier for us? Why doesn’t he appear to us as he did to Thomas? As Karl Barth asked: “Why are we still held at a distance from Him?”²

A preacher friend tells of a man who comes to Easter services each year with his wife. “I’m just coming to be with my wife,” he says. “I can’t believe in something when there’s no evidence.”

We are people, after all, who live in an age where scientific proof is demanded. We want proof that this medicine works, that this vitamin will make us healthy, that the bridge they’re building on Trotwood be proven to be safe. Like doubting Thomas, we live in a world where the word is: “I’m not going to believe it if I can’t see it.”

To be sure, this world of science in which we live is enormously beneficial. Medical science has given us ways to combat disease. Disciplines like geology and paleontology have given us a greater understanding of the way the world works. The Hubble Telescope has almost single-handedly opened up the wonders of the universe in ways we had never before imagined. Christians do not need to oppose science or fear anything that science discovers.

But at the same time, there are limits to what science can determine. The more astronomers study the curved space-time of the universe, the more mysterious it becomes. The more they probe into the sub-atomic particles of the atom, the more those particles defy easy understanding. We can map areas of the human brain, but we still don’t know what makes the mind work. We can observe people asleep, but still don’t know why it is that we must spend a third of our lives asleep. The more we learn, the more we know how little we know. One writer puts it this way: “These splendid discoveries of the

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.1, p. 318.

human imagination have made the world more mysterious than it ever was. We now know better than we did what we do not know and have not grasped.”³

Besides, asking science to prove things like the resurrection is to ask of science something it is not equipped to do. Someone said it is like asking a powerful Grand Prix race car to prove itself satisfactory as a New York taxicab.⁴ Belief in the risen Christ is a whole different kind of reality.

After all, the most important things in life are not subject to scientific proof. No one would ever say: “I want you to prove to me that it’s a beautiful spring day outside.” Or: “Prove to me that this Beethoven symphony is really majestic.” You just don’t apply the standard of proof to such areas.

Or suppose you woke up some morning and your spouse said: “I want you to prove your love to me today in a way that I can see it.” Now that would not be a fun day. How do you prove love? Love is in a whole different category from scientific proof. Love has to do with relationships.

The husband who said that the only reason he comes to Easter services is to be with his wife is in relationship with her. He may not have a clue about the resurrection of Jesus, but he loves her and he will be with her, and so he finds himself in church contemplating this ultimate mystery of life that overcomes death.

The resurrection of Jesus is not available to scientific standards of proof. Neither doubting Thomas nor we will ever get enough proof to satisfy ourselves. The resurrection of Jesus means that we are in a relationship with Christ, and that relationship continues today, because Jesus is alive. What our faith offers is not proof, but companionship with the risen Christ.

Look again at the picture. Look how tenderly Jesus guides the hand of Thomas. Jesus loves this man, and wants his love in return. We’re in a whole different arena here from proof.

About the only proof we can offer for the resurrection, in fact, is the very existence of the Church. What was it that turned scared disciples into courageous proclaimers of Jesus?

³ David Berlinski, “The evidence of things not seen.” Harper’s Magazine, April 2008, p. 17.

⁴ Berlinski, p. 20.

Something happened that transformed them, and we call that something the resurrection. What is it that has preserved the church through hardship and scandals and times of corruption, so that the gospel continues to be preached and heard, unless it is the continuing presence of the risen Christ with his people?

You want proof of the resurrection? It's you. You're here today, even with your doubts and questions. You're here because you seek a word of life, a word from our risen Lord.

You want proof? Every time a baby is baptized, and you raise your hand to say you will help, every time we come to the table together to partake of broken body and shared blood, every time we bow together in prayer, every time we gather around a passage of scripture, every time we go to visit someone who is sick, every time we take food to a home where someone has died, we are showing that Jesus Christ did not rise in vain.⁵ The proof that we have to offer the world is the relationship we have with one another, in the name of the risen Lord who loves us and is with us.

The resurrection is not about proof. It's about relationship. Jesus is alive. He is with us. He wants you and me as friends. As he did with doubting Thomas, he wants to take our hand, and guide it gently, so gently, to his wound, and say: "See, this is how much I love you."✠

⁵ Barth, p. 321.