

Feast of St. Thomas, Apostle and Martyr  
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

## SEEING AND BELIEVING

Judges 6:36-40; John 20:24-29

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

It is a bit odd to focus one's attention on a Gospel lesson relating an event from after Christ's resurrection from the dead less than a week before Christmas. But with St. Thomas's Day, we get a little taste of Easter in Advent. And yet, perhaps it is not so out of place, for the words of Christ to St. Thomas apply just as well during Advent as they do during Eastertide. In fact, these words fit the Church and her faith no matter what time of year it happens to be. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

You probably remember the story of Thomas quite well. He was the one apostle who had not been present in the upper room that Easter evening when Christ came to the disciples and showed Himself to be risen and alive. And when the others tell him, Thomas, of course, does not believe them. Who would, after all? Thomas had seen with his own eyes that Jesus had died and was buried. And now they were telling him that He was alive again? This sort of thing just doesn't happen. Sure Thomas had seen Jesus raise other people back to life, but who would raise Jesus? Certainly not any of them! The only man with the power to raise people from the dead was now dead Himself, or so Thomas thought.

But Christ shows Himself to Thomas alive, just as He had shown Himself to the others. Moreover He satisfies Thomas's desire for tangible evidence, for verifiable proof, saying to him: "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." And Thomas believing at last confesses His faith. And then Jesus says: "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Thomas is not the first man in the Scriptures to ask God for a little proof. We heard about the Old Testament Judge of Israel, Gideon, in the lesson from the book of Judges today. Gideon asks for a sign from God that he should attack the Midianites and Amalekites who had been oppressing Israel for the previous seven years. Putting fleece on the ground, he asks the Lord to make the fleece wet with dew but keep the ground dry to show that he should attack. The Lord does so. And then, as if the one sign were not enough, Gideon asks the Lord to do just the opposite and give him another proof of His will. And the Lord does so, making the ground wet this time, but the fleece dry.

But then the Lord tests Gideon's faith. He tells the judge that he has too many men to fight this battle. Now that is not usually a problem in warfare. The more men you have on your side, the better! But the Lord says that if the Israelites fight against the Midianites and Amalekites with this many men they will think that they have won by their own strength and not by His grace. And so Gideon sends away 22,000 of his men, leaving him with a force of only 10,000. And then Lord tells him that he

still has too many men. The Lord had given Gideon a sign, now would he really believe it and relinquish even more of his army? And Gideon, at the Lord's command does so. He sends away another 9,700 men, leaving him with a mere 300 warriors. And then, after assuring Gideon again of victory, He sends Gideon into battle. And Gideon, trusting in the Lord is victorious.

And what of Thomas? Putting his fingers into Christ's nail wounds and thrusting his hand into the spear wound in His side was not the end of the story. Thomas now armed with this proof of the Lord's resurrection is sent out into the world to preach that resurrection to people who will not see the Lord alive with their own eyes. And his faith will be tried. Tradition tells us that he was sent to preach the Gospel in Ethiopia, in Persia and as far as India. Along the way he suffers imprisonment, slavery, and eventually martyrdom.

And so it is with everyone who receives a special sign in the Scriptures. The sign is there to prove something, it is true; but faith is still required of those who receive it. So it was with Gideon and with St. Thomas. So it was also with Abraham. Who received a son by miraculous birth but was then told to go and sacrifice that same child on Mount Moriah. He had received a sign, but this did not mean he needed any less faith! So it was with Mary at the birth of Christ. She received a heavenly message and sign indicating that she would bear the Messiah. And yet her faith must have been sorely tested along the way, whether it was facing down the accusing looks that were flashed at a pregnant and as yet unwed girl, or taking the trip to Bethlehem in late pregnancy and then finding no place suitable for lodging or in which to give birth. So it was with the magi. They saw the sign of the star in the heavens; and yet what faith was required to follow it and then to believe on the young child to whom the star led. Likewise with John the Baptist who leaps in his mother's womb at Christ's presence; who points confidently to Him as the Messiah in the wilderness, yet questions and struggles in faith while imprisoned.

The signs themselves are important as proofs of God's action and intervention in our world and in our history. But signs can never replace faith. If anything, the reception of divine signs seems to require more and greater faith in the end!

And what signs have you been given by God? All of these are given to you. For through the Holy Scriptures you have numerous proofs of God's work in our world, of our salvation through Christ, and of His love of you and your own salvation through His grace. No, you may not have seen all of these things with your own eyes. But others have for your sake. And so St. Peter tells us: "we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."

And if you doubt the word of Peter and the other Apostles, then ask yourself this question. Why would they all suffer so many trials and tribulations if what they preached was not true? Why would Thomas, Peter, and the others go to their deaths for the sake of a message that was only a fable or myth concocted by themselves or by their community? That would be foolish. Perhaps a madman will die for a lie of his own making, but would twelve of these apostles do it? And would the others who were eyewitnesses with them also suffer along with them? No. Their lives and their deaths bear testimony to the truth of the Gospel they preached.

And what of you? You might say, "yes, but why doesn't God give us signs anymore to strengthen our faith?" You too have received signs from God. When you were baptized the pastor said to you: "Receive the sign of the holy cross both upon your forehead and upon your breast to mark you as

one redeemed by Christ the crucified.” Now it is true that this in and of itself is not a miraculous sign, but the action of God that it accompanied was. For Baptism truly marks you as one of God’s own children. The outward sign of the cross is but a reminder of the actual sign of redemption received in this sacrament. But the reception of this sign too requires faith. It requires that you believe something you cannot now see, but which God has declared to be true; that you are His own child and heir; that your sins are forgiven; that you have been given new life, raised up and clothed with Christ Jesus and His righteousness. The eyes cannot see this miracle of God and yet faith holds tight to it as the source of its existence and life.

And what of Holy Communion? Here you receive another miraculous sign. Bread and water become Christ’s Body and Blood and you Christians are given to eat and drink of it. And by eating and drinking in faith you are given renewed forgiveness, salvation, and a foretaste of eternal life. The sign is there to prove your fellowship with Christ. But faith must be there as well to lay hold of that which cannot be seen with the eyes.

And how do we know these signs are valid and true? We know because Christ has established them with His Holy Word. And His Word is sure. What is more miraculous than the creation and continued existence of the ordinary things of this world? The Word of the Lord upholds all of it by His power. The natural laws of this world, the matter of which it is made, the complexity with which it operates, all of these ordinary things are miraculous signs of God’s love for mankind in making them, and of His continued love in upholding them. So if the Word of the Lord is operative in these things. Why does it seem strange with Christ by His Word lays aside for a specific time and purpose, this natural order in order to do something different, something miraculous? Both are done by His Word.

And now that Word has come to us this Advent. Will we believe it and thus be well prepared for Christ’s coming among us now and for His eventual return in glory? What need is there of other signs? Rather let us imitate the Holy Apostles and all the faithful who have gone before us, who believed the Word of the Lord and were accounted righteous thereby. Let us in faith lay hold both of the signs God already has shown us, and of His Holy Word behind and along side of those signs, and know that Christ became incarnate, died and rose again for us, and gives us through these gifts forgiveness, life and salvation. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Amen

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧