

Series: The Garden of Evidence and Intimacy (a Gospel of John study)

Sermon Text: John 20:24-31

Key Word(s): Belief, Faith

(*This account is also found in Mark 16:12-20*; Luke 24:36-53)

We're in week 4 of a 4-week series called, "*The Garden of Evidence and Intimacy*." In this study of John 20, we're seeing evidence of Christ's resurrection and of the intimacy Jesus seeks with His followers (i.e., a personal, affectionate, and loving relationship). We're also being challenged with a question Jesus posed after He raised Lazarus from death in John 11:25-26: "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though they die, yet shall they live...Do you believe this?*" Our first lesson focused on how **the resurrection of Jesus changed everything**. In lesson 2, we learned that **while evidence is the start, intimate love is the goal**. Lesson 3 was about how **Jesus wants us to tell others what He's done for us**. My aim today is for us to gain clarity on this...

BIG IDEA: Our belief must come from Scripture, not our human senses.

That's what this encounter with *Thomas* is about. Like the previous 2 stories, it illustrates how *one more transition was occurring*, specifically how future followers must have a type of *belief* that is not acquired with human senses and reasoning. This is our point today: While Christianity involves sound reasoning and has lots of physical evidence to support it, such things are not the source, nor the object of our *faith*. *Faith* is the supernatural ability to *believe* what God says in His Word--He is both author and subject of our *belief*. In last week's story, we read of Jesus breathing His Spirit into His followers. Do you know why He did that? Because God promised it in Ezekiel 36:27: "*I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*" As Mary Magdalene found out, the Spirit provides next level intimacy with God. His job, however, isn't to replace Scripture with experience, it's to help us believe all God has said. Just as Jesus breathed out the Spirit, 2 Timothy 3 says that "*All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness--to equip us for every good work.*" Romans 10:17 also says, "*faith comes by hearing the word of God.*" Not only do we benefit from the Spirit's work whenever we read Scripture, but *faith* has always been possible by hearing and *believing* the Old Testament (the Law, the prophets, the Psalms). This is what the Father sent His Son Jesus to confirm for Israel and ultimately for us.

John used Thomas to illustrate all this, so let's familiarize ourselves with him starting in **verse 24**: [his Hebrew name was] *Thomas*, [he was] *one of the twelve*, [in Greek he was] called [*"Didymus"* or] *the Twin* [maybe he had a *twin*, or it was a nickname due to his *twin* chin or his love for *"#twinning"*? Scripture doesn't say, but oddly he] **was not with them when Jesus came**. So, get this--*one of the 12*

wasn't in the **locked** room mourning with his fearful friends. Yet, it seems they interacted with him the week following the resurrection. *Verse 25 says the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord" [the verb tense suggests repetition. So, as they kept telling him...] he said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into those marks, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."* [Thomas was a careful, pragmatic person--not flighty or easily swayed]. *Verses 26-28 say that 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."* [this was like an Easter evening do over but with Thomas present]. *He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; put out your hand and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve but believe."* [with great joy] *Thomas answered, "My Lord and my God!"* [Jesus, ever-so-graciously, granted his silly request, but it's unclear if Thomas ended up touching him. In fact, Jesus attributed his **belief** to "**seeing**" rather than "**touching**" in...] *verse 29 where He told Thomas, "Have you believed because you've seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."*

For John, Thomas' story illustrates how **a transition was occurring**, though this seems more like a "reset" or "redirect" to what God has always expected--to **believe** in Scripture by "**faith without sight**." In fact, Jesus was doing something God had sent Old Testament prophets to do in Israel--validating a **time of transition** with supernatural miracles. It was never God's intention for Israel to **believe** in the signs, but rather in the object to which those miracles pointed (God, His Word/Promises). He affirmed this in Matthew 12 by scolding Israel with these words: "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah...Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; behold, something greater than Jonah is here.*" [i.e., you have more than they did, yet you still won't believe!]

Yikes! We have even more than they did, right? The Old Testament plus the written testimony of New Testament **apostles** who **saw** the Messiah! Perhaps to reinforce the idea that God doesn't owe us more proof, John said he intentionally left things out in *verses 30-31: Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.* Pop quiz: What did John say was more important? A) Miraculous signs. B) What they pointed to. (**B!**) He was super intentional in his writing--only describing stuff that made biblical connections and drew out the meaning. We've already noticed, for instance in chapter 1, how John described Jesus being the co-Creator from Genesis, then proceeded to tell stories to prove He was bringing about a new creation.

Similarly, he has already told us some things about Thomas that shed light on this encounter. **He first quoted Thomas in chapter 11** where the others were begging Jesus not to visit Lazarus' tomb for fear the Jewish leaders would kill Him. In **11:16** it was Thomas who said, *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* While sounding a tad cynical, Thomas was pledging loyalty to fight alongside his Messiah. **John quoted Thomas a second time in chapter 14** where Jesus said, *"I go to prepare a place for you and will come again."* Will you look there with me? In **14:5** Thomas boldly asked what everyone else was probably thinking: *"Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?"* Jesus famously replied, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."* In **14:8**, Philip kept pressing into Thomas' question, so Jesus said: *"Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."* While some people say that Jesus never claimed to be God, thanks to the inquisitive natures of Thomas and Phillip we have one of Christ's clearest confessions of His divinity (deity)! Notice also how Jesus had expected them to believe what Scripture said about Him BEFORE the cross and resurrection!

So, what does all this mean? In one sense, it means we don't need the New Testament to **believe** in Jesus is God's Son and the Christ (Messiah). While it sure clears up some stuff, Jesus grew frustrated by Israel's repeated demands to prove Himself. ***Our Lord and our God*** requires a type of belief that isn't acquired with human senses and reasoning. He wants us to take Him at His Word--to **believe** the Scriptures, not necessarily in signs, miracles, or even hard evidence. In closing, let's put our thinking caps on for a minute: What was Thomas really rejecting that entire week? The Scriptures! Not just the OLD Testament but also the NEW testimony of **the Apostle's**, which would soon be written down and become inspired Scripture! Thomas rejected exactly what we're expected to accept with the Spirit's help. Of course, since he's **one of the twelve**, it was always God's plan for Him to see the risen Christ. However, his story highlights **the important transition that took place**--that once and for all, everyone must *"walk by faith, and not by sight"* (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:7). As most of you know, Hebrews 11 is a catalogue of imperfect Old Testament people who exhibited the only type of faith God accepts--**belief that comes from Scripture, not our human senses**. So, please ponder 2 crucial questions: **1) Is your belief based on faith or sight?** (i.e., Is it based on what you can see with human senses or on what can only be seen with God's supernatural gift of faith?). **2) Do you realize the value of the Bible?** (i.e., Is it just as exciting for you to explore as a field containing buried treasure? I sure hope so, because it's a treasury of truth that God has given us to help us know Him better).

Let's pray: Father, thank you for teaching me that doubters like Thomas should never be put down or vilified. It's sad how people only think of him as "*doubting Thomas*", when what he teaches us is that "*doubt can be a friend to faith when it inspires curiosity to know God better.*" He is an example that inspires us to be more earnestly inquisitive towards God and others, rather than being prideful know-it-alls. Because doubt did not define his life, Thomas also urges us not to remain stuck in our doubts. His legacy isn't that of an old, obstinate scoffer but of someone who kept engaging and seeking with a sincere, curious nature that helped him know Jesus better and become one of his best witnesses. May we never lose our curious nature, but may it serve to drive us into the arms of Jesus--to **believe** in Him like Thomas came to **believe**, but also to serve Him like Thomas ended up doing. Historians think that Thomas took the gospel farther than all the others--perhaps to India! God, give us a curiosity for your Word that inspires his kind of active, living faith of which Hebrews 11 says: "*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*" Amen.

So, what's your NEXT STEP?

- Remember, our next step always begins with faith in Christ. Either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Either way, His Spirit will help you.

Preparing for and applying our sermon from John 20:24-31.

- Take a deep breath and ask God to speak to you as you read this passage. Share a few of your impressions and takeaways from these passages.
- Is your belief based on faith or sight? How do you know? Where do you find yourself trusting in things that you can see with human senses, and where do you find yourself trusting in what's only seen with God's supernatural gift of faith?
- What has this lesson taught you about the value of the Bible? Describe for us how you interact with it during the week. Are you bored with it, or searching for something more, or do you find it as exciting to explore as a field containing buried treasure or like the guy did in Psalm 119?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us about many other resources.

Quotes related to this passage:

- **The scenes in John 20:** In the final scene, we meet Thomas, a man no different from us. He is a man for whom faith will only be a reality when the concrete evidence of resurrection is provided to him. He possesses no experience at an empty tomb, nor has he heard or seen Jesus. Thus, faith seems for him daunting and impossible. Thomas becomes a template for us, who read the story of Jesus from a distance. We hear the report, we read John's Gospel, and at once we are challenged to believe. Thomas obtains what he desires and so believes, but he misses the blessing that Jesus pronounces on those who believe even though they cannot touch Jesus' wounds. This is precisely our position as we live out our lives and our faith in the modern world... In this climactic chapter we have stories of faith and a catalogue of experiences that are each unique. Peter and John possess the evidence of the tomb; Mary enjoys the "evidence" of an encounter. The apostles (along with others) finally experience the Spirit. But the spotlight is on Thomas. He refuses to believe (20:25) until his "evidence" matches theirs. When he is given an objective basis for believing (20:27), Jesus recognizes his faith (20:29) but indicates that the demand for such evidence will not be met for everyone. Those who are truly blessed are men

and women who believe but are not like Thomas in that they do not make faith contingent on such physical demands. (Burge, 566-568)

- **A locked room in Jerusalem:** “Even aside from the Feast of Unleavened Bread still going on, the heaviest period of mourning normally lasted seven days, so none of them would have left Jerusalem for Galilee yet anyway. The disciples would remain inside to mourn. Residences often were equipped with bolts and locks. Bolted doors would prevent anyone from entering (a heavy bolt could be slid through rings attached to the door and its frame), unless one could walk through closed doors. Jesus’ appearance in the locked room suggests a resurrection body whose nature is superior to that often envisioned in other ancient Jewish literature.” (Keener, 310-311)
- **2 nearly identical scenes:** Notice how the Thomas scene closely resembles what happened on Easter evening (a *locked room* where Jesus appeared to convey His *peace*). Had Jesus been standing on the other side of the *locked* door? Was His Spirit already in the room, just invisible? He just appeared as they were talking and was like, “*Put your finger here, see my hands; place your hand in my side.*” Thomas had to be freaking out and wondering, “*How did Jesus hear what I just said?*” Do you ever say things you shouldn’t or think Jesus is too busy to listen to your troubles or complaints? This story assures us that our Lord and God cares so much for us and how we treat others that He never misses a thing we think, say, or do. In fact, Matthew 10 says God has our hairs numbered and knows when any bird falls to the ground. In big, churchy terms this proves our God is “*Omniscient*” (all knowing) and “*Omnipresent*” (always present). What’s interesting, though is how we aren’t told if Thomas ended up touching Jesus. In fact, Luke’s account (24:41-43) says that after he showed them the wounds, “*they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, so Jesus said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.*” Anyway, something flipped the switch for Thomas, who then made one of the most stunning confessions in John’s entire gospel—that Jesus was God! Look again at *verses 27-28*: After Jesus said, “*Do not disbelieve but believe*”, Thomas replied, “*My Lord and my God!*” By the way, John used this statement later when he wrote Revelation 4:11: “*Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.*”
- **One of the 12:** “But John’s pointed reference to Thomas as ‘one of the Twelve’ is to tell us something. Recall that the evangelists, in speaking of Judas as the future betrayer of their Lord, apply ‘one of the Twelve’ to him. That one of Jesus’ inner circle should betray him marked Judas’ act of treachery as all the more repulsive. (John 6:70, 71; Mark 14:10, 20, 43; Matthew 26:47) Here we have the same pointed reference. Notice, it tells us, that even one of the Twelve, one of Jesus’ chosen band who had enjoyed for three years the closest association with Jesus and received the most instruction—one of them let such doubt rule in his heart. ‘One of the Twelve’ fixes blame on Thomas...The Greek form for “told” informs us that the disciples kept on telling Thomas that they had seen the Lord. They were making an earnest effort to convince Thomas. It is fair to conclude that they presented to him all the accumulated evidence for Jesus’ resurrection: the reports Mary Magdalene and the other women had brought back from the tomb, including the appearance of the risen Jesus to them, Peter and John’s visit to the tomb and their viewing of the powerful evidence there, the appearance of Jesus to Peter, and the story of the Emmaus disciples. (Franzmann, 1033-1034)
- **My Lord and My God:** “Pliny, a governor writing near the probable location of John’s readers two or three decades after John, reports that Christians sing hymns to *Christ ‘as to a god.’ By contrast, the Roman historian *Suetonius reports that the emperor Domitian (probably reigning when John was writing) wanted to be honored as ‘Lord God’ (Life of Domitian 13). Most

importantly, ‘Lord’ and ‘God’ appear together repeatedly in the *Septuagint as divine titles, including in forms similar to ‘my Lord and my God’ (Ps 35:23 [34:23 LXX]; Hos 2:23 [2:25 LXX]). (Keener, 311)

- **Thomas’ amazing confession:** “The confession My Lord and my God (28) is remarkable for its theological grasp. Whether or not Thomas fully understood his own words, this unmistakably high conception of the divine nature provides a fitting conclusion to John’s record of the path of faith. Nevertheless, the weakness of Thomas’s confession was that it depended on sight. Jesus needed to make a correction here by mentioning the greater blessedness of those who believe without sight, which applies to all Christian believers ever since the time of Jesus. We depend upon secure evidence (Scripture, the witness of the church through the ages) but not on actually seeing Jesus. It is clear that the record in the gospel is selective and will lead to a specific kind of faith in Jesus. The combination of Messiahship and divine sonship sums up the view of Jesus presented in this gospel. The linking of faith with life is a succinct summary of the application of the gospel. (Guthrie, 1063)
- **A different kind of seeing and hearing:** “The first half of the verse is a statement (KJV, NEB, NIV), not a question (RSV, NRSV). Jesus does not disparage the faith of Thomas (‘So now you believe because you see me?’) but simply cites a fact (‘Because you have seen me, you have believed’). Thomas’s faith is anchored to sight. Then Jesus goes on to utter a blessing not on those who see and believe—which is certainly a virtue paraded throughout the chapters of the Gospel. Rather, he offers a blessing on those who believe but have not seen. Here Jesus points forward beyond Thomas, beyond the apostolic circle, to the world of the church, to believers who come to faith through the testimony of the apostles. Juxtaposed in these verses are faith based on sight and faith based on the word of those who testify. Thomas’ faith is not necessarily blemished because of his need for sight; it is simply privileged, for few would ever have the gift of what these disciples have experienced... Jesus has in mind people (such as ourselves) who are now reading this Gospel and have not had Thomas’s opportunity to touch Jesus’ wounds. There can be no more remarkable privilege. But John has provided us with a record of signs—his Gospel (20:31)—that can serve us in a similar capacity. While not doing what Thomas did, we have his story, and this should give us a reasonable ground for belief. (Burge, 563)
- **John 20:9:** In other words, John was confessing that they were worthy of blame because Jesus could have expected them to believe that he had risen even before they had seen him, simply on the basis of the Scriptures Jesus had repeatedly and thoroughly explained to them. Further confirmation comes from Jesus’ words of reproach to the Emmaus disciples: “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25). In one respect Thomas was just as deserving of rebuke as the other male disciples were. But in another respect Thomas was even more to blame than his fellow disciples. They at least had believed after they had heard of the Lord’s appearance to Peter (Luke 24:34), and they had believed even more firmly when he appeared to them and identified himself as the same Jesus who had been crucified. The sight of their Lord satisfied them completely. But Thomas demanded even more than sight. The report of the others that they had seen the Lord meant nothing to him. He demanded not only that he see Jesus with his own eyes, but also that he be allowed to touch the wounds in Jesus’ hands and side. Franzmann, 1036-1037.
- **John’s conclusion:** For many scholars these verses constitute the conclusion of John’s Gospel. He acknowledges that Jesus provided many other signs with his disciples and that the selection offered here in his Gospel is a mere collection (20:30). This means that John is aware of a rich source of traditions about Jesus and that he, as an editor, has had to make a careful selection to

suit his own literary needs...John writes to strengthen faith, and it makes no difference what might be your starting point (i.e., evangelism or encouragement).” (Burge, 563-564)

- **The pressing question:** “How will we stand in this parting of the crowd? Through his literary expertise John has placed us in the drama by making us view the evidence in the case for and against Jesus. He knows well that his readers—in Jerusalem, Ephesus, Rome, Singapore, Lusaka, Cambridge, and Chicago—will not have the same experience that he or even Thomas had. We look on the evidence from afar. Nevertheless, there is still good evidence to be had—there is an historical story that must be read—and this story is sufficient to make belief not only defensible but reasonable. We stand with the Beloved Disciple looking at the emptiness of the tomb (20:8), recognizing that these indeed were Jesus’ burial clothes. John invites us to make the same decision uttered in that garden: “The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed” Burge, 576–577.

Quotes related to the larger context:

- **Full life:** John said he wrote this letter to help us find “*fullness of life through believing Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*” Chapters 1-12 contain 3 years of real-life stories where people met Jesus during His public ministry. Chapters 13-21 slow way down as Jesus began to reveal His (God’s) heart to His disciples in the week leading up to the cross and resurrection.
- **Book Context:** The Gospel of the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, provides a clearly stated purpose. *John 20:30-31* says, “*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.*” Some people demand to have all their questions satisfied before bowing to Jesus, yet John claimed his limited account was enough to bring anyone to faith. As we read it, our Savior and friend emerges from the pages as a real person in the real world. Jesus shows us what we could become, if we too would rely on His infinite Father who will gladly supply whatever we need.
- **Life in his name:** Life is the Greek word, “ζωή”, which means “Life, Living, Lifetime, Life-Giving” and is where we get the word, “zoology” in English. Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words says it’s “used in the NT of life as a principle, life in the absolute sense, life as God has it, that which the Father has in Himself, and which He gave to the Incarnate Son to have in Himself, Jhn 5:26, and which the Son manifested in the world, 1Jo 1:2. From this life man has become alienated in consequence of the Fall, Eph 4:18, and of this life men become partakers through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, Jhn 3:15, who becomes its Author to all such as trust in Him, Act 3:15, and who is therefore said to be ‘the life’ of the believer, Col 3:4, for the life that He gives He maintains, Jhn 6:35, 63. Eternal life is the present actual possession of the believer because of his relationship with Christ, Jhn 5:24; 1Jo 3:14, and that it will one day extend its domain to the sphere of the body is assured by the Resurrection of Christ, 2Cr 5:4; 2Ti 1:10. This life is not merely a principle of power and mobility, however, for it has moral associations which are inseparable from it, as of holiness and righteousness. Death and sin, life and holiness, are frequently contrasted in the Scriptures.”

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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Direction for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Go for a single, not a home run.
3. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Some great resources for digging deeper into community group life:

How life together looks <http://austinstone.org/stories/film/item/140-missional-community-lukes-story>

Rethinking what we do https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvWnXYSELF4&feature=player_embedded

Numerous articles to provoke thought <http://tod dengstrom.com/archives/>

What groups of 2-3 might look like <http://tod dengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LTG-Overview.pdf>