

John 20:19-22

¹⁹ 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." ²⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Mixed Faith

Pastor Rick Lemburg, of Casa Grande, Arizona, describes himself as a "Presbyterian by earthquake." Here's what he means. His Baptist grandmother moved to California from Iowa. The local Presbyterian pastor visited her and asked her to join his church. "I'm a Baptist," she answered. "It will take an act of God to make me a Presbyterian." While they were chatting, an earthquake shook the home. She said immediately, "I'll join." Pastor Lemburg could find no statistics on how many Baptists became Presbyterians by earthquake, or vice versa..

I wish faith were that easy! I sometimes wish God would give each of us an unmistakable sign. Of course, I'm not sure what that sign would be. Woody Allen commented, "a million dollars deposited in a Swiss bank would be nice." Any sign from God would have to be pretty dramatic. People can explain away almost all miracles. But we have to ask ourselves, what would the faith that was forced on us by a miracle really be like?

Atheists like to say that they don't need faith to live. Actually, they live by faith every day. Normal, daily faith, is needed every time you step into an elevator without testing it first. You exercise faith whenever you drive down a street and expect the oncoming driver to stay on his own side of the road. Your daily faith is based on experience and common sense, but it's still not proof.

On the other hand, **saving faith**, which trusts everything I am – my whole existence in life and in death— upon the promise of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is not common sense. It is a gift of God. It is literally a miracle.

The first place saving faith makes itself felt is in our conscience, freeing us from the guilt of sin. Then it spreads out to more and more of our heart. Children who are baptized into Christ believe everything their parents tell them. That is "natural" or common faith. Every child has it. But when saving faith begins to emerge into their awareness, it first touches their conscience. They become aware, as the old phrase has it, of sin and grace. They begin to realize that they need the forgiveness of sins.

An adult who comes to Christ experiences the same thing in a different way. The adult convert may have many "felt needs" which drew him or her to Christ. He may have turned to Christ at a moment of crisis or pain. But professing Christ and being converted to Christ are not necessarily the same. Unless repentance for sin and the assurance of forgiveness are present, saving faith has not yet manifested itself.

Repentance is always the doorway to saving faith. We have to turn from our sin to God's grace in

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Christ in order to be saved. That's why getting a "sign from God" may lead to a certain kind of belief, but not necessarily to saving faith. As R.C. Sproul put it, there is a big difference between believing **in** God and believing God!

Saving faith, faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, is given to repentant sinners through the external Word of the Gospel and the internal work of the Holy Spirit. It comes into our hearts as God's "new creation." But it doesn't wipe out everything that's already in our hearts. Saved sinners still battle with guilt, struggle with disappointment, and are sometimes overcome by bitterness. We are saints and sinners at the same time. Thus, faith is always mixed with at least a little doubt. Page | 2

That's why we have no right to condemn Jesus' disciples when they ran away in fear. We could easily have done the same thing. Think about it. What a tough time this had been for the disciples. They had left everything to follow Jesus, and now He was dead. They had expected a kingdom and gotten a crucifixion. It didn't matter that He had tried to warn them, to prepare them. A lifetime of religious conditioning was not wiped out instantly.

Everything had happened so fast. Jesus was betrayed and arrested. He was tried and tortured. He was crucified and buried. They were shell-shocked, hiding in fright. Then they heard the unbelievable news from the women. A couple of them ran to see the empty tomb, but the others just kept hiding, paralyzed by fear.

When Jesus suddenly arrived in the room, He had to quiet them down. "Peace be with you," He said, which was the ancient equivalent of "calm down, guys!" That they didn't really believe it was He at first is very evident from the text. He had to show them His hands and side.

When we are in a crisis of faith, that's where the Lord has to take us. Jesus asks us, "Who am I?" And the answer is not only, "You are the Son of God." We have to go back to that place where we began. "What has Jesus done for me? What does it mean to belong to Him? What price did He pay for my salvation?" We have to meet Him again at the foot of the cross.

Then He gave them a commission: "As the Father has sent me, so send I you." The disciples became apostles; the learners became messengers. It's important to remember that we are also on a mission. Like the apostles, we have been sent into the world to bear witness to Jesus Christ. While most believers do not have a public call to preach, every one of us has the call to glorify God in our struggles, including our struggles with doubt. Remembering this will not lessen the struggle, necessarily, but it will help to encourage our determination to hang on. Weak as it is, our persevering faith will bring glory to God.

Then He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (This was to carry them through until the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit would be permanently poured out on all believers.) God breathed life into their spirits, in the same way He breathed life into Adam. As we receive the Holy Spirit anew through God's Word of promise, He will supernaturally help our wavering faith. He won't make us perfect, but He will give us "strength for the day." That's His promise.

I didn't read the whole passage, but you may remember the story. One of the disciples was missing at that first encounter with the Risen Christ. It was Thomas. "Unless I see the marks of the nails in His

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hands and feet and the wound in His side, I will not believe.” Those were his famous words when told about their visit from Jesus. Now Thomas has been unfairly given the tag of “Doubting Thomas.” I don’t think he was more skeptical than the others. After all, they **had seen** Jesus’ hands and feet! In fact, Thomas went much further than all the other apostles. According to ancient tradition, he founded the church in India, which today is still known as the *Mar Thoma* church.

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But Jesus does say to Thomas that those who believe without seeing physical evidence are more blessed than those disciples. So what does this text imply for our lives today?

1. EVERYONE GOES THROUGH MOMENTS OF DOUBT

Dave Dravecky, former pitcher for the San Francisco Giants, lost his arm to cancer... Of course he also lost his career. During his time of struggle he received many letters. Most of them were letters of encouragement. But one in particular haunted him. Part of it went like this: “If there is a God who cares for you so much, why did he allow you to have the surgery in the first place? I have lived 41 years in this old world and I have yet to see any piece of genuine evidence that there is anything real about any religious beliefs. God certainly does not love me and has never done one single thing to express love to me. I have fought for everything I have in life. Nobody cares about what happens to me and I don’t care much about what happens to anyone else either. Can’t you see that religion is nothing but a crutch used by a lot of weaklings who cannot face reality, and that the church is nothing but a bunch of hypocrites who care nothing for one another and whose faith extends not to their actions or daily lives but is nothing more than a bunch of empty phrases spouted off to impress others?”

Dave Dravecky was haunted by that letter because he had struggled with some of the same doubts. He concluded this: “Anytime we come to God it is an act of faith. When we knock on heaven’s door, regardless of how hard we knock or how long we knock, how angrily or how stubbornly, we state by our very presence at the door that we believe God is there, that he is in charge of the world, and therefore in some way responsible for what goes on here.” So in spite of painful doubts, real faith will keep turning to God until faith is finally renewed.

2. SOME HAVE TO STRUGGLE WITH DOUBT WITH EVERY STEP OF FAITH

Every Christian struggles with something. For some, the main struggle of their lives is doubt. Sometimes we are afraid of mentioning struggles and doubts to fellow believers. If so, we need to be like Thomas. If we struggle with doubt, we need to talk about it. Just being able to share our struggles with trustworthy brothers and sisters can be a tremendous help.

3. WHEN STRUGGLING WITH DOUBT WE NEED TO TOUCH JESUS’ WOUNDS

Obviously we can’t do that literally! But we can connect with His wounded hands and feet, and his pierced heart. How? But the means of grace He has given us— Word and Sacrament. We need to stay at the cross when we struggle with doubt. And we go to the cross when we hear the Gospel, when we repent of our sin, and when we receive His body and blood in Communion. We have to keep close to the place where faith began, in the promise of God through the Gospel. We can’t unravel all the mysteries of life, but we can constantly find faith in the place where it most matters.