

April 12, 2026

John 20:24-31:

“Do Not Disbelieve, But Believe”

- I. “I Will Never Believe”
- II. “Peace Be with You”
- III. “Do Not Disbelieve, But Believe”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 N. Oakland Avenue
Decatur Illinois 62526

“Do Not Disbelieve, But Believe”

John 20:24-31

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

I think I speak for most who joined us this last Holy Week and throughout Lent that my heart was and is still overwhelmed with the joy of another celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ! Praise and thanks be to the Lord, who continues to work mightily through this Church for the proclamation of His Word! The following day, feeling thankful, refreshed, and ready to write this very sermon, I sat down in my office, opened the Bible to the appointed Gospel reading, reflected, and studied like I always do. That is, until our text for today forced a thought that popped into my mind that was not about the crowds, the celebration, or the voices raised on Easter morning, but about the one who was maybe there... and wasn't so sure.

I thought about Thomas, who was absent when Jesus appeared, who did not see what the others saw, and who did not hear what they heard. He did not believe and gave that very proclamation, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” Maybe you are like Thomas, or maybe you are on the brink of it. Perhaps unbelief has arisen in your life, and maybe, just maybe, you are not convinced about the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And before those of us who think we stand at a distance from Thomas are too quick to judge, we should recognize just how familiar his words really are.

I. “I Will Never Believe”

“Unless I see... I will never believe.” That may not be something we say out loud. But how often does it live quietly in the heart? We tell ourselves that once we make sense of it, once we feel it strongly, once we see the right proof in our lives, then we will believe. And what begins as a question does not remain one for long. It becomes a condition. And that condition turns into something far more dangerous, where we place ourselves in the position of judge over God and His Word.

Some have wrongly called Thomas a doubter, but he does not simply struggle; he sets the terms. He draws the line and decides what will be enough for him to believe. How often do we do the same? When we hear the Word of God and the proclamation of all Christ has done for us, do we hesitate to receive it as truth? How often do we pick and choose what we would like to hold on to and then throw out what makes us uncomfortable? How easily we hold God's Word at a distance and weigh it, as if we were the ones who must decide whether it is worthy to be believed.

This is not just any message. This is not one opinion among many. This is the very Word of the living God who does not lie, who does not deceive, who has spoken clearly concerning His Son. And when that Word is set aside, whether loudly or quietly, it is still unbelief. And it leaves us exactly where Thomas was. It leaves us outside of the peace, the comfort, and the certainty that Christ had already come to give.

As written in 1 Corinthians 2, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him... and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” If you find yourself unconvinced, unsettled, and still holding Christ at arm's length, then hear this plainly: you are not standing in a neutral place. You are not simply “thinking it through.” You are standing over God's Word, demanding that He meet your conditions before you will trust Him. That is your heart turning away from the only One who has ever spoken truth without error.

You may tell yourself that you are justified in your hesitation. But what you are really doing is refusing the testimony God Himself has given about His Son. And outside of that Son, there is no life, no forgiveness, no hope that will hold when everything else falls apart. So do not cling to your conditions. Do not wait for some better feeling or clearer proof. The danger is far greater than you think.

Listen instead to the Word that stands outside of you, that does not bend to your whim. He calls you even now, and this is not because you have the power to believe on your own, but because His Word does what it says. As written in Romans 10, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." It causes us to turn from sin, to hear the truth, and to believe it. The question is not whether God has proven enough. He has suffered and died on the cross in the purest act of love for all of humanity. The real question is whether you will continue to resist what He has already spoken.

II. "Peace Be With You"

And what a wonderful thing that Jesus does not leave Thomas or us in that unbelief, nor does He leave the disciples in their fear. Jesus comes and stands among them. He does not wait for their courage to grow or for Thomas to work through his doubts. He simply comes, and His first word is not a rebuke but a gift: "Peace be with you."

This is not a shallow peace or a calming of emotions as some may say. It is the very peace He accomplished in His death and resurrection. It's the peace that was proclaimed all of Holy Week and is proclaimed throughout the whole year of the Church. By faith in Christ, your sins are forever forgiven, and God no longer holds the Law against you. Rather, His wrath is fully satiated by Christ. This is the peace He had already proclaimed from the cross when He said, "It is finished," and now He delivers it personally and directly into their fear and into Thomas' unbelief. The risen Christ brings what He has won, and He gives it freely.

Jesus turns to Thomas not to shame him, but to address him with mercy: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Here, the Lord does not affirm Thomas in his conditions, but neither does He abandon him because of them. He confronts the unbelief and, at the same time, provides the very means by which that unbelief is overcome. He shows him His wounds. The marks of the nails and the pierced side are the concrete proof that the One standing before him is the same One who was crucified, the same One who bore the sin of the world, and the same One who has made atonement.

One might say, "Of course Thomas believed. He saw, and he touched." But our Lord does not leave the matter there. He speaks beyond Thomas to all who would come after him: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." This is not a lesser blessing, as though we are at a disadvantage. Rather, it reveals the way Christ has chosen to be present with His Church until the end of the age.

Brothers and Sisters, faith is not simply a matter of clinging to feelings, but to the Word that proclaims the crucified and risen Christ. And so the command, "Do not disbelieve, but believe," is not a bare demand; it is a Word that carries with it what it says. The One who speaks it is the One who creates the faith He calls for. As the Scriptures testify, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). What follows is that Thomas' confession bursts out, "My Lord and my God!" This is not as a result of his own reasoning, but the fruit of Christ's presence and Christ's Word.

You and I have not seen Him with our eyes, but we have heard Him. And that is not a deficiency; that is His appointed means. He has bound Himself to His Word. Just as He came to Thomas, so now He comes to you,

not by visible appearance, but through the Scriptures that bear His testimony. That is exactly what John declares: “Now 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” (John 20:30–31).

These words are not mere records of the past; they are the living voice of Christ in the present. In them, He still comes, still speaks, and still says, “Peace be with you.” It is by these words that Christ is still calling you, a poor, wretched, doubtful sinner, out of unbelief and into faith that promises life everlasting.

III. “Do Not Disbelieve, But Believe”

I would be a dishonest man to stand before you and present this as if it were an easily accepted reality. There are things we do not understand. There are moments when the heart hesitates, and the mind wrestles. But the answer is not found in pushing through that uncertainty or mastering it. The answer is found where Christ has promised to be. It is found where He speaks, gives Himself, and creates faith where there was none.

To simply say, “Just believe,” as though that settles everything, would ignore the very struggle that lives in our hearts. Justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone is not a small claim or a minor truth that fits neatly into everything else you already think. This is the claim that Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, has been raised from the dead, that He is Lord, that He is God, and that your life, your sin, your eternity, and your everything rests in Him.

And yet, this same Christ does not stand at a distance from you. Even now, in this very moment, He is not far from you. He is present in the Word you have just heard. The same voice that spoke to Thomas is speaking here. The same Christ who showed His wounds is the One proclaimed to you, crucified for your sins, and risen for your justification. And with Him comes the very peace He spoke in that room. Not a peace that depends on how strong your faith feels, but a peace grounded in what He has done. A peace established by His death. A peace confirmed in His resurrection. A peace spoken to sinners—even doubting ones. Hear His Word once again that is spoken to you: “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Not as a burden laid upon you, but as a Word that does what it says. The One who calls you to believe is the One who creates that faith through what you have heard. “Peace be with you.” Your sins are forgiven.

Amen.

Pastor Lucas Abbott