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John 20:24-31. English Standard Version.

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

²⁶ 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." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ 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 20:24-31. New International Version.

²⁴ Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the 12, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Collective faith.

We're celebrating All Saints Day, and we honor those who have come before us.

I'll get back to this, but first, I'm a technical guy, and like a lot of people today, I don't always believe what I read, what I am told, or what I see on the Internet.

But there are people who have a very radical view on just what it is that we can be confident is real. Recently, I was sitting with a patient who was being treated for a psychosis. He was on a 72 hour, involuntarily hold, and he told me that he was very relaxed about the whole thing. I found this intriguing, as often, patients on involuntary holds complain bitterly to me, saying that they are being held unconstitutionally, that they are prisoners of war, that they have been kidnapped, or that they are being held because the CIA knows that they hold secrets that could destroy the federal government and all that America stands for. I asked him if his acceptance of his situation meant that he knew that he needed help, and that it was a good thing that someone realized that it was best if he was held. He said no, the reason he was relaxed was because he was a Solipsist. Now, this man turned out to be highly intelligent and well-read, and he was referring to a very real school of philosophy, one that holds to the following notion: a human can be confident of absolutely nothing being real, other than his or her personal mind. This means that we can only be sure that our minds exist, but we cannot be sure

that what our brains perceive is actually real. This man said that he didn't care if he appeared to be in a hospital or in jail or in a homeless shelter or in a massive chateau – because nothing was real except the state of his mind. I asked him if he thought that I was physically real. I'll get back to this and tell you what he said.

Let's consider our quote for today. It's a brief scene from near the end of the Gospel of John, and we heard it from two different translations, the ESV, which we usually use, and the NIV, which is another very popular translation and is used by many Christian churches in the U.S. There's a subtle difference between the two translations that I'll get to in a bit. First, what's happening here? It's a story that appears only in the Gospel of John and not in the other three Gospels. In it, Jesus has been crucified and has died. John tells us that Thomas was absent when Jesus first visited with the Apostles after his resurrection. The Apostles who were there give Thomas their witness about the resurrected Jesus, but Thomas says he won't believe that Jesus has risen from the dead unless he receives very specific evidence: *“Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”* The story ends with Jesus returning again to his disciples, including Thomas. Jesus says to Thomas: *“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but*

believe.” Then Thomas replies with sudden acceptance: “*My Lord and my God!*”

Apparently, Thomas does not take up Jesus on his offer to poke and prod Jesus’ body; rather than demanding the evidence he had asked for, he renews his faith.

Now, scholars generally agree that the Gospel of John was written around the end of the first century A.D. So, by the time this incident was written up by John for inclusion in his Gospel, the Apostles and all those who had ever met Jesus, were dead. John was writing for people who couldn’t believe because they had seen Jesus or had contact with anyone who had seen him. None of John’s readers would have firsthand knowledge of Jesus’ miracles, of his impact on those around him, or of his death and resurrection. I believe that the focus of this story *isn’t* that Thomas is just some schmuck who knows Jesus and yet *still* has trouble believing. True, Thomas was there all along, through everything. He was an Apostle. How could he not have believed and then demanded to put his hand in the hole where Jesus had a sword shoved in his side? But no, that is not the point of this story, to degrade Thomas. So, then, what is the point of the story?

Remember it was written for believers who were *not* present for the life of Jesus.

Consider our two translations. Compare the same Greek sentence, translated two different ways. Here is the ESV version: *Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me?”* Here is the NIV version: “*Because you*

have seen me, you have believed.” The first is a question, and it does sound sarcastic: Hey, Thomas, says Jesus, do you believe that I have risen from the dead just because you have now seen me risen? The second one, though, is a statement. Jesus simply says hey, you have seen me risen, Thomas, so you believe. Here’s what’s true: available scriptural manuscripts make it ambiguous as to whether the Greek is a question or a statement. But either way, Jesus is not asking a rhetorical question, not making fun of Thomas. He’s just stating a fact. Thomas had a weak moment, but now that he has seen Jesus like the other Apostles have seen him, Thomas believes.

The point is that this was written, not for Thomas’ generation, but for those who would be asked to believe while never having seen Jesus or talked to anyone who knew him. These are believers like us. Jesus is saying that Thomas and his generation had it easy: they could believe because they saw. But we are asked to believe even though we will never see. However, I actually think that they had it tougher. They were the first generation of believers. They were the ones who had to process something entirely new and then accept it. We, on the other hand, can build on the experience of millions – in fact, a few billion – believers who have come before us. There is a collective faith. Yes, it’s easier for us. Perhaps another way of looking at this passage is that John is saying that things

have simply changed. Thomas was struggling with something bizarre and unexplainable. Dead people don't come back. No matter what he had seen up to this point, he had only his own mind, his own thoughts to draw on. He didn't grow up being told about Jesus, about what Jesus did and how Jesus rose again. It was just too hard to believe based only on what he himself had seen and heard.

Kind of like the patient I visited. He didn't believe that he was necessarily in a hospital, being held against his will. He had been in jail, too. He told me about jail, how it was a horrific experience that thankfully happened only in his mind. He'd also been abandoned as a child and raised in an institution. That was his defense: the bad things that happened to him might not be real. He could only be sure that his brain told him it was all true. So, be thankful that we are not the first generation of believers. Because of the two thousand years' worth of believers, of faith that has come before us, we can easily accept that Jesus is real. We sense a vast, collective reality about Jesus and God that is outside of our minds.

I included two verses that come after the story of Doubting Thomas. It says: ³⁰ *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;* ³¹ *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.* We've looked at these lines before. It doesn't relate directly to Thomas' story.

Rather, it's a summation on John's part, telling us why he has written the entire Gospel. He's saying that he has told the story of Jesus so that others could believe. That's another important thing to remember: the first followers of Christ did not have the Gospels to rely on. They had no other believers who had come before them and written about it. They had nothing that they could study. They only had what they saw and heard and thought. But we have Scripture.

There's a bit more to the story of Thomas. In the first version of our story, Thomas is referred to as "*Didymus*". In the second, he is referred to as "the Twin". Here's what's interesting. In Hebrew, Thomas means "the twin". And the Greek word for twin is *Didymus*. So, Thomas is, indeed, the twin. But what does this mean? Some say that there is nothing to this. His name just happened to be derived from the Hebrew word for twin, so people called him by the Greek word twin. But another suggestion is that Thomas is our twin, and in fact, the twin of all people. We have trouble accepting new things. We have trouble believing, and so unless we're psychotic, we demand evidence that we can see and touch. When it comes to Jesus, to our faith, just like anything else, we are like Thomas. But why do we believe? Because we are blessed. We have a gift Thomas didn't have. We can lean on that history of faith, something that is real and eternal.

Collective faith is how we hold each other up. It's why we come here each Sunday. Yes, in our hearts, we know there is a God who wants only the best for us. We know that our God wants us to model our lives after the forgiving, generous, loving life of Jesus Christ. We know that there is a life beyond this life. But it is so much easier to keep our faith up if we come together every Sunday. We, as non-first-generation believers, cannot see the risen Jesus in person. We were not there to witness his life firsthand. Our friends are not the other disciples of Jesus. We must rely on the history of faith behind us, and we must depend on each other in order to accept what we know in our hearts to be true.

Now, remember that the Solipsist in the hospital thought that nothing was real, except that his mind perceived things. Reality was only a perception, what he thought, not what actually existed. I asked him if he thought I was real. I'll tell you what I said. He said that of course I, the chaplain, is real: who the hell else, he said, other than some sucker reverend, would sit and politely talk to a crazy man for almost an hour, except someone who was real. The rest of the people in his life, the ones who always rejected and hated him, were fake, just things in his mind. But the chaplain, the one guy who would spend so much time with him and treat him nicely – that guy was real. It was an astonishing, loving compliment that I will always treasure. Try being patient and kind with other people. Be real for

them. Be the thing in their lives that doesn't have to be dismissed as not actually existing for them. That's what Jesus is for us.

But this is the day we celebrate All Saints day. We honor those who came before us and have gone on to live for eternity. These are the people who made it so much easier for us. They are the ones who have built up the collective faith upon which we lean. They are the ones who made the belief in God something that was part of our world before we were born. Whether we came to believe when we were small children or when we were older adults, we stepped into a rich, mature Christian world. We didn't have to believe just what we saw and heard and thought. We had it easy. We should thank them. Amen.