

“Taking Jesus at His Word”

Introduction: It is often said, and perhaps you’ve said it yourself, “If I had lived in the days Jesus lived, and he was right there next to me, doing all those miracles, then I’d have no trouble believing.”

Well, possibly, but even if that was the case, Jesus doesn’t let us off the hook. As he winds up his gospel account, John records an encounter Jesus had with the disciple we have come to know as “doubting Thomas.” When the risen Jesus shows Thomas the nail marks in his hands and the spear mark in his side, Thomas comes to faith. In response, Jesus declares: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed (Jn. 20:29).

The writer of Hebrews adds to this conversation by linking believing and seeing in this way: “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (11:1).

In other words, virtually everyone who comes after Thomas, in order to enter into and to live out a vibrant, life-giving faith, will need to do so without seeing, without fully knowing and understanding all that lies ahead of us. How are we to do that? We need to take Jesus at his word. In this morning’s text, we meet a man, a “royal official,” who was called by Jesus to do just that.

I. The Approach of the Official

A. This fellow was an official in the administration of Herod Antipas, the Roman appointed ruler in Galilee. Among other things, it meant he had rank, and he had riches. He held a position of respect, and he lived a comfortable life. But neither his rank, nor his riches, had prevented his young son from becoming seriously ill. And, neither his rank, nor his riches, had enabled him to find any kind of cure, or even relief, for whatever it was that was plaguing his son. So, the man got on his horse and rode the 20 miles from his home in Capernaum, on the shore of the sea of Galilee, up into the hills to the town of Cana, where he heard Jesus had come.

B. Cana should sound familiar to us. If it doesn’t, John reminds his readers that it was the place where Jesus, in attendance at a wedding, turned water into wine. It was the first of his “signs,” John tells us, clues that we are given intended to lead us to the treasure that is Jesus. In between his visits to Cana Jesus had been in Jerusalem celebrating the Passover with his disciples and cleansing the temple courts of money changers and the sellers of sacrifices who were preventing the Gentiles from coming to pray and worship. On the way back north, Jesus had engaged a Pharisee named Nicodemus, and a Samaritan woman whose name we are never given, in life-giving conversations. Then, he had spent a couple of days bringing the good news of the arrival of God’s kingdom to a whole crowd of Samaritans.

C. Now, understandably, this man who had sought Jesus out was interested in more than conversation; he pleads with Jesus to come home with him and save his son from death. The verb used here, which our text translates “begged,” suggests repeated asking. It must’ve been quite a step for this official to take. He had probably never had to beg for anything in his life. But he was out of options; he was desperate; he was willing to swallow his pride. Is there a parent, or grandparent, in the room who cannot identify with this father’s plea? When it comes to the needs of our children, we would do anything! And this Jesus, well, rumor had it that there was a certain power about him.

II. The Response of Jesus

A. How, then, did Jesus respond? Wonderfully, Jesus cared for this man, but in an unexpected way, a way in which Jesus invites us to learn from. He says, “Unless you people see signs and wonders you will never believe.” That seems like just a bit of a harsh thing to say to a grieving father! But Jesus was using this man’s request to address the crowd that had gathered around them. It also seems as if Jesus knew that the welcome he received from the crowds when arriving back in the region of Galilee was a potentially dangerous one. It was dangerous because it was focused on the miracles, on the signs themselves; the signs hadn’t actually led these people into a relationship with Jesus.

Illustration: It would be something like coming to visit New England from somewhere in, say, Texas. Essex was part of your itinerary because you wanted to visit the home of the fried clam. As you walked the streets, you came to The First Congregational Church, and noticed a sign planted in the ground outside of the church. You read all about the church, and even took a picture of its famous bell hung high up in the steeple, and then you continued on. “What a great church I visited today,” you would later put up on your Instagram account, along with that picture of the bell. But in point of fact, you never made it past the sign. You didn’t come in to share in the church’s worship, or meet its people, or experience the presence of the Spirit. You thought the sign and the bell were cool, but you missed the real treasure of the church.

B. In much the same way, the people had stopped short of exploring who Jesus really is. They were looking for the dramatic, for displays of power. But his miracles were never meant to be ends in themselves, or to be what Jesus did to impress people at parties. Rather, as Jesus miraculously fed and healed and even raised the dead, he was providing signs of the liberation he was bringing from that which prevents us from living a truly human life. The danger is that we can say to Jesus, “I know you’ve got the glory and the power and the wisdom so if you just give me a little bit of what I need I’ll be out of your hair and on my way.” But Jesus knows that what we really need is himself, in a relationship that will grow and last over the long haul, far beyond any demonstration of power.

C. For that relationship to exist, there will be many times when we need to take Jesus at his word, before we can see or fully understand where he might be leading us. In that regard, this man wasn’t an easy student! For, in response to Jesus the man said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.” Here was a fellow who was not only desperate, but one who was used to giving orders, and having them followed! But Jesus simply responds with an order of his own, “Go, your son will live.”

D. What was Jesus doing here? He was inserting himself and his word into the man’s request, before any healing took place. Jesus would not be coming to lay hands on the boy, anoint him with oil, or even pray over him. He simply gave the man his word and invited him to trust it, without seeing a thing. If he was going to see, he would need to first believe. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” They have believed without seeing because they have taken Jesus at his word, they have followed the signs all the way to him.

Where might Jesus be asking you to take him at his word? Reading through his Sermon on the Mount (Ma. 5-7) might be a good place to start. There are all sorts of words in there from Jesus on topics ranging from how to handle various relationships, to how to respond to our enemies, to how to handle our possessions.

As you read, keep in mind that in one way or another, we all put our faith in what we do not see. We hear on the news that it will rain tomorrow so, in faith, we take our umbrella to work. We get on an airplane, exercising faith that the pilot knows what she's doing. We schedule a coffee with a friend and have faith that they'll show up at the appointed time. The problem is that in all of these areas, we can be let down. The weatherman can be wrong, a pilot can make a bad decision, a friend can forget. But Jesus is absolutely trustworthy. This sign, the second which has taken place in Cana, is one of many that are meant to lead us to that trusting place.

As John comments, right after recording the conversation between Jesus and Thomas:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 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. -John 20:29-31

The sign we've seen today is not a promise that Jesus will heal everyone. He actually wants more for us. He wants us to know that he is with us and cares for us over the long haul, and on into eternity. He wants us to experience the life that is truly life. His promise is that if we build our lives upon his word, if we let the signs lead us all the way to the treasure that he is, then no matter what the storm is that blows and beats against our house, that it will not overcome us (Ma. 7:24-27).

So let us go to the table together, taking Jesus at his word that his broken body and his shed blood are what begin the process of creating new life in us.