

John 20:19-31
All Eyes on Me
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The week after Easter. Every pastor's favorite Sunday to take off. In comparison to the celebration last week, it can be a bit of a downer. But that can also help us understand a bit more about its meaning. Like Pastor Roger said last week, the first Easter wasn't this big celebration. There was confusion. Many were still mourning. It took some time for the news to spread and even for the disciples to take in and process all that had happened and all that was happening. And that's a bit of what we get to look at... and process today.

This is pretty intimidating up here. This podium is much bigger from this angle. This big open space... with all those eyes looking at me. It reminds me of my first high school wrestling match. Up to that point, I had competed in other sports, but in basketball and football, there are several people on the court or field at one time. Even if a lot of people are watching, there are several people, other people, to look at. Not so on the wrestling mat. It's me and the other guy. And as I looked around, like I'm looking around now, all the eyes were on me. And those eyes felt heavy, especially to this 14-year-old boy. What were they thinking? Do I look silly? What do I do with my hands? Every movement felt suspect. It's a bit like that here. After all, my wife has preached here and has set the bar pretty high. Are the eyes comparing us? Anyone doing any type of performance, whether it's musical or public speaking, knows that dealing with those eyes is an important part of the craft. I also say this because understanding the mindset I bring with me up here may help you be a bit more gracious if I stutter... or lose my place... or just don't preach very well.... But in all honesty, these are just mild insecurities compared to what Thomas must have been dealing with in this story.

This doubting Thomas, as he's often been called for millennia. I think that title is a bit aggressive and, if we consider the mindset he's bringing into this story, we might look at him a little bit differently.

A few days prior to this, he had probably felt on top of the world. The Messiah was here and he was friends with Him. Miraculous things were happening and he got to be part of it. When people looked at him, it probably made him feel really good. His people were on the verge of salvation and he got to be part of it.

Then things took a drastic turn.

Jesus was talking a bit funny at supper... but He always did that. Then He insisted on staying up and praying. That was weird.... Then He's arrested. Well, maybe this is when Jesus really shows His power. Then He's beaten viciously. This is not good. I can imagine his heart just dropping, feeling the weight of the situation. And it's not just about having to watch his friend and teacher be beaten. Jesus was those things, but Jesus was also his hope. His security for the future was being beaten down. Any eyes on him at that point have different looks now. The eyes had questions now... demands... explain this. And he couldn't in those moments, other than to hold on to hope that Jesus was going to find a way out of this. But as the day went on, that was seemingly more and more impossible.

Then Jesus goes to the cross. But there's still time... He can still win here. Like the mockers were saying, He could get down from that cross if He wanted to! But He doesn't. The spear goes in, the blood and water come down. It is finished. Now the eyes are terrifying. Am I next?

His friend, his teacher, his hope, his security and his future was dead and buried. And this is where we find him. Talk about trauma. Talk about insecurities. Talk about I don't want anyone to see me. And it gets worse at the beginning of this passage here. He walks in to where the disciples were, where his friends were, seemingly the only safe place in the world, and they tell him that they've seen Jesus. And then He vanished like magic before Thomas arrived... How convenient. His only allies have lost their minds and he is truly alone. I mean they're saying that Jesus appeared out of thin air, and then vanished?

How would you respond? What kind of reaction would you expect? "Phew, thanks for letting me know. I guess I don't have to be sad anymore..." Thomas doesn't buy it. I don't think he can at this point. Instead he says he needs to see and touch the wounds that he watched be inflicted. He wants to know that the body that they are saying came out of the tomb, is the same one that went in. And we want to know that too.

Then he has to wait an entire week. How miserable that must have been. The next day... no Jesus... and the next... and the next, and the next, and the next. Each day hope fading that his skepticism was wrong. But then, after the week, Jesus appears. And He gives Thomas exactly what Thomas said he needed! Touch my wounds. Put your hand in my side. Doubt no more. I feel like this story is often presented like Jesus is chastising Thomas. Quit with your silly skepticism. You should have believed this whole time.

I don't think that is the case. I think this is more of a beautiful moment where Jesus is telling Thomas, I know what you need and here it is. As I was searching for an illustration to help show what this must have felt like for Thomas, a scene from what might be the greatest saga of the 20th century came to mind.

The scene is from *Rocky* part 2. Spoiler alert. In that movie, Rocky is preparing for his rematch with Apollo, but can't get his head in the game. Then, suddenly his pregnant wife collapses at work. They are able to deliver the healthy baby, but she slips into a coma. Rocky refuses to see the baby. He says "we'll meet the baby together." She's in a coma for a while and Rocky stays with her and time is getting closer to the fight. Things are not looking good. But then Adrian wakes up. And, as they're meeting their baby for the first time, she says to Rocky, "I want you to do something for me" and as he gets closer, she says "I want you to win..." then the bell dings and the inspirational workout music begins. What a moment!

That's how I imagine this scene playing out with Thomas. He's sitting there with the disciples, feeling down and disconnected from them. And then Jesus appears. And Thomas is still a bit shocked and confused. And Jesus gets close to Thomas and says "touch here... put your hand here..." Then the bell rings and the music starts and Thomas gets a flashback of all the funny things Jesus was saying that he finally understands. When Thomas asked, "how will we know the way if you are not here to show us" and Jesus responds, "I am the way, the truth and the life." And Thomas has a new understanding, and a new understanding of this Messiah, and of death, and of God and responds, "My Lord and my God!"

Tradition has it that Thomas went on to India. He started 7 churches and he was eventually martyred there. He lived the rest of his life in committed service to his Lord and his God.

So what can we take away from this? Well the first is that life can be devastating. If I went around the room, I'm sure many could share stories of times when life brutally beat down their hopes and dreams and left them alone, scared, and not quite knowing how to go on. Some might be there right now. This story was for you. Jesus said to Thomas that he saw and believed, but blessed are those who haven't seen and believe. That's you and me. We haven't seen Jesus in that way. John even says it "I'm writing this so that you may believe." The initial receivers of this gospel would have faced some pretty difficult times and would need to know that it's ok to feel scared. It's ok to feel hurt. But there is hope. There is victory through one who also suffered. Don't let go.

But there are also many here that haven't experienced anything like that. For those, it may be difficult to understand that position. Do you really need to have these experiences to believe? I don't think so. But I do think that growth is impossible without resistance. What kind of resistance do you have? What kind of resistance do you allow into your life? That's a really interesting question. Obviously, for most that have experienced extremely difficult situations, they did not choose it. Thomas didn't choose it that week. But Jesus chose the cross. He went willingly to prove or to reveal something. What does it mean for you to take up your cross?

And for me, as Erin and I continue to prepare a church on Chicago's west side. We don't know what the road ahead looks like, but we know that we will certainly face difficulty. There will be many eyes on us, as there already are. May we continue to look to the risen Lord who Himself chose to endure suffering for us, even unto death. And as He has overcome, may He continue to help us overcome and give us strength to say, "My Lord and My God!" Amen.