

One of the things I love about Harbor and especially about Easter weekend, is that we come into this place from a variety of backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences, and together we get to look at the heart of God for us seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ...

You see...if we're being honest, some of us might say, *"I'm not sure I believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for the sins of the world, and was raised to life three days later."*

And others might say, *"I believe that Jesus died and rose from the grave, I just have no idea what it means for my Monday morning...or Friday evening."*

Maybe you have grown frustrated with the local church. And while you don't question whether the events surrounding Easter are real, you're confused by how something so messed up (the church) can teach something so wonderful (Jesus).

Finally, many of us are here because Jesus Christ has captivated our heart and affections. And though we were an absolute wreck before He broke into our lives, by his grace, we are learning to joyfully live for Him with all that we are...

Regardless of why you're here, we believe that the local church should be the warmest, most welcoming place on earth where regardless of whether we're far from God, fed up with church, or following Jesus, we can come together in the same place, without pretense or pose, confident that because of the goodness and mercy of Jesus Christ, we are welcomed back into the arms of our Heavenly Father...

This is the message of Easter in a sentence.

"The arms of God are open wide to ALL because of Jesus!"

Now...I want to do my very best to show you that God's arms are open wide and that you can know Him personally, by looking at an encounter between Jesus and a man named Thomas, just days after Jesus' resurrection!

Look at the gospel of John, chapter 20, vs. 24!

"One of (Jesus') disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. They told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he replied, 'I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.'" John 20:24-25

Now...Thomas has gotten a bad rap historically because of his initial doubt in Jesus' resurrection...

But the truth is, there wasn't a single one of Jesus' followers who expected Him to walk out of the grave.

Many people today want to pass off Jesus' resurrection as fiction because they believe that ancient people were superstitious and credulous and therefore, the account of Jesus' resurrection must have gotten off the ground because of naïve people who believed that things like miracles and resurrections are possible!

But if you look honestly at the details surrounding the resurrection narrative, they won't let you arrive at this conclusion! I'll show you why...

Patriots: I know that many of you are ready for the remnants of winter to pass and are eager to get outside to the beach! While the rest of the country is having Easter egg hunts this weekend, we're still having snowball fights and there's something terribly wrong with that! What's even more disturbing is that in only four months, NFL teams will report back to camp, which means that fall will be just around the corner and this whole winter thing will begin again!

Happy Easter!

Now...for those of you who like football...tell me. What will happen every Sunday this fall when the Patriots are in town? By mid-to-late-morning tens of thousands of people will have descended on Foxborough, and there will be all kinds of hoopla, feasting, and celebration.

There isn't a single home game that goes by where Gillette isn't busting at the seams with expectant fans.

And all of this for football!

Now...each of the gospel writers agree that Jesus talked often about his death AND resurrection with his followers. So, if the gospel writers were fabricating the entire account of Jesus' resurrection; that is, if they were making the whole thing up in hopes of getting a movement off the ground, wouldn't you assume that there would have been at least a small crowd tailgating at Jesus' tomb? Waiting for the moment when he would walk out of the grave? And when Jesus emerged...I mean there would be cheering, and burgers grilling (lamb burgers) and Jesus' friends would be hi-fiving, saying to one another, *"I told you he would do it!"*

But that's not how any of the gospel accounts go, is it?

No one was looking for a resurrection!

Which is why on Sunday morning, the day Jesus predicted he would walk out of the grave, women still went to the tomb to anoint his dead body with spices. It's why, upon discovering the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene was overcome with sadness and fear instead of joy, and why Peter and John were confused instead of hopeful! It's why the majority of Jesus' followers were fearfully hiding behind locked doors. And when the women reported that they had seen Jesus, the disciples wrote them off...

No one, including Thomas, expected a resurrection!

So...instead of criticizing Thomas, I think we'd do well to give him grace and seek to identify with him. Because it's only when we are honest with our doubt or skepticism that we can pursue Jesus with the same kind of intellectual and emotional honesty as Thomas did.

Look at the text again...

They told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he replied, 'I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.'" John 20:25

See: When Thomas says, "*I won't believe unless I **see**,*" the word **SEE** means, "*to think, process, and ponder.*"

Telescope: This past Christmas, we gave our oldest daughter Karlie the first item on her wish list...a telescope! As a parent, isn't it great when you start getting your kids gifts that you can enjoy too? No more Polly Pockets...but telescopes!

Now...this was the first time we had used a telescope, so I was under the impression that the moment we pointed it at the stars, the heavens would immediately open up before us!

But that's not what happened! Instead...we had to carefully select just the right star; then, using a built-in laser pointer, we focused our lenses on the star...

The whole process took a great deal of focus, time, and far more patience than I typically have but I was willing to do it all so that Karlie could see a star!

Even though Thomas' friends told him they had seen Jesus, Thomas wanted to look closely, think about, and carefully consider whether Jesus was alive! And he teaches us something very important when it comes to Christian faith!

There is a world of difference between knowing about something second-hand and experiencing that same thing first-hand!

Hawaii: I had the privilege of being born in Hawaii, in a small village on the Northwest tip of the island of Oahu. I'm sure that, for many of you, this satisfies your curiosity regarding my tan. Unfortunately, my family moved back to the mainland after I completed first grade, so I never really got to experience island life to the fullest! In fact, the only time I ever surfed was when my brother and I returned to Hawaii to celebrate my high school graduation and spent a half-day attempting to ride the waves before calling it quits!

Now...I've known people who have surfed...in fact, one of my friends has body-boarded the famous North Shore, where, every year, surfers from around the world gather to ride waves that can reach up to thirty feet tall!

(Picture) Now...most of us have never seen anything like this first-hand...and while we can look at pictures and imagine what it must be like, the waves at Hampton Beach will only take our imaginations so far!

Knowing about something second-hand, and experiencing it first-hand are two completely different things!

When Thomas said... ***"I want to see his hands...and place my hand into the wound in his side!"*** He was saying, ***"I want to see so I can experience the risen Jesus first-hand!"*** Someone might say... ***"Well...that's fine for Thomas; he got to see the risen Jesus first-hand! But how are we supposed to see Jesus two-thousand years later?"***

To answer this question, you need to understand that the gospel-writer John wrote this first-hand account of Jesus' life, in part, to help those of us who have never seen Jesus first-hand come to know Him personally!

All throughout his gospel, John tells us that if we want to see Jesus, we can...we simply need to look closely!

*"So the Word of God became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And **we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.**"*

John 1:14

*"**No one has ever seen God.** But the one and only Son is himself God and is near to the Father's heart. **He has revealed God to us.**"* John 1:18

John went on to write a series of letters to Christians, and at the very beginning of his first letter, he wrote this...

*"We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom **we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes** and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life...We proclaim to you what **we ourselves have seen** and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." 1 John 1:1, 3*

John writes, we've looked, observed, and pondered; we let our eyes adjust to Jesus until we saw Him for Who He really is...the Son of God! And then John writes...*we tell you this so that you can have **fellowship** with us*; that is, *so you can also see and know Jesus on a personal level!*

How are you going to see Jesus? Go to the gospels! Prayerfully read about Jesus, carefully consider his life, look closely at Him as if peering through a telescope, and let your eyes adjust to Him...no matter how long it takes!

If honest, many of us might admit that we rarely look closely and carefully at Jesus. As Christians, it is easy to begin living off of second-hand information that an author, pastor, or small group leader tells us about Jesus rather than relating to Him first-hand. And some of us who are skeptical of Christianity spend more time listening to what the History or Discovery Channels say about Jesus than we do personally examining His life!

Please hear me...you can know about Jesus intellectually, but never know him personally! You can know of Jesus from a distance, but never relate to Him as a friend! If we only have secondhand information about Jesus, the cross and Easter will be nice and comforting and worthy of occasional celebration, but it will never melt our hearts and bring us life, peace, and joy that Jesus came to bring us...

What separates Christianity from every other religion, is that Christianity is not primarily a system of rules and regulations, but a first-hand relationship with Jesus Christ. This is what Thomas longed for, wasn't it?

"I must see Him for myself!"

Now...keep reading in verse 26...

"Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. 'Peace be with you,' he said. Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe! My Lord and my God! Thomas exclaimed.'" John 20:26-28

Let me ask you a couple of questions. ***“What did Thomas see when he set his eyes on Jesus?”*** He saw nail holes in Jesus’ hands, and a wound in his side.

And what did Thomas do? In a flash, he began to worship the wounded Christ! ***Why did He worship?***

Cosmos: When you stand at a distance from the stars and galaxies on a beautiful clear evening, it evokes a certain measure of awe and wonder...but when you look through the most powerful telescopes on earth, the beauty of the cosmos will take your breath away!

When you finally get a firsthand view of Jesus Christ crucified; the Son of God with holes in his hands and a wound in his side; and it hits you for the first time that He was wounded for you, it will take your breath away...you’ll worship!

Please hear me! You were made for God. We were created to know and delight in his beauty and perfection and to live in joyful response to His greatness and love! But we haven’t loved him fully! In countless ways, we’ve said to God, *“I don’t want you in my life. Don’t tell me how to live or what to do...just leave me alone!”* The Bible calls this sin. Sin always tears apart relationships. And our sin has severed our relationship with the One our hearts were created for! And unless God mercifully intervenes, we’re sunk!

The beauty of the gospel, which we celebrate at Easter...is this. Even when we weren’t looking for God, God came looking for us!

“...God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.”

Romans 5:8-11

Paul writes, “God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were sinners.”

We deserved condemnation...but on the cross, Jesus was condemned to make us innocent!

We were separated from God...but Jesus left the Father’s side and faced hell itself to give us hope of eternity with Him!

We were God's enemies...but Jesus paid the penalty we deserved to restore our friendship with the Father!

Now, God's arms are open wide to all because Jesus stretched out his arms, bled, and died for us all!

The question is... *"How do we step back into the arms of God?"*

What did Jesus ask Thomas to do? (Look at the text!)

*"Don't be faithless any longer. **Believe!** My Lord and my God! Thomas exclaimed." John 20:27b-28*

Believe! Does believing mean we'll never struggle with uncertainty? Will we have all of our questions answered? No, Thomas certainly didn't understand everything there was to know about Jesus. In fact, any Christian who is honest will tell you that sometimes they have more questions than they do answers, yet they still believe!

So...what does it mean to believe?

Elise (Hands): Let me share with you the best picture I can come up with to describe what the Bible means when it talks about believing in Jesus Christ.

My 8 year-old daughter, Elise, still goes with me just about everywhere I go, and to this day, every time we walk through a busy parking lot, or work our way through a crowded store, Elise places her hand in my hand! When she does this, she's saying to me, *"Dad...I trust you...I feel safe with you...and I know that as long as you're holding on to me and I'm holding on to you, everything will be ok!"*

I love Elise deeply and would give anything for her, but my hands are nothing like Jesus' hands! Jesus' hands have holes in them because He gave His life for Elise, and there's nothing I want more for Elise than for her to rest in the hands of Christ!

A Christian certainly believes that Jesus is God's Son; that He died and was raised to life three days later! A Christian believes that Jesus died to pay the debt for our sin to sweep us back up into the Father's arms...

But at the end of the day...a Christian is someone who places his or her hand into the hand of Jesus and says...

"I know, Jesus, that as long as you're holding onto me and I'm holding on to you, everything will be ok! Today, I trust you!"

Close

Let me ask you... Have you ever placed your hand into the hand of Jesus? I'm not asking if you've walked through the sacraments, or grown up around the church, or lived a pretty good life, but have you ever placed your whole life in Jesus' hands!

Have you honestly said to God? *"Father, I'm a sinner in need of your mercy, please accept me on the basis of Jesus' goodness and not mine."*

If you're a Christian, are you regularly placing your hand into the hands of Jesus... *He's not only a Savior, he's a King! The one who took nails for you is worthy of your entire life!*

To understand the message of Easter, you must begin here...by looking at the wounded and crucified Jesus. Because of Him, the arms of God are open wide to all!

But as Christians, we don't stop here! Easter reminds us that our King is alive. The one with nail holes in his hand...and a spear-sized gash in his side is alive...and He will hold on to us no matter what life brings!

When we face rejection or criticism, we know that Jesus was rejected for us, and will never abandon us!

When we're afraid, we remember that Jesus faced and overcame all the things that terrify us (loneliness, illness, sickness, even death), to bring us peace...

When we're torn apart by regret or shame over past failures or look at a self-destructive habit in our life, we remember that Jesus was willing to be torn apart to call us his friends! Do we honestly think he'd say, *"I took hell for you, but I didn't see that coming?"* NO!

If there's an area of life eating you alive today – marriage, money, work, a broken relationship...place your hand in his and trust Him...

Finally, because of Easter we know that Jesus will return and put an end to all the things that break our hearts...no more tears, suffering, pain or death...

But for today, we say with confidence, *"Jesus, you are my God and King...and because you're holding on to me and I'm holding on to you, everything will be ok!"*

Encounters with Jesus
Part 10: The Seeker
Easter 2015

Can you say that tonight? If not...go to Him!

Pray!