

Eyewitness testimony. Many television stations throughout the country have what they call “Eyewitness News.” But eyewitness news can be problematic. Is eyewitness news trustworthy? Can we believe everything we see?

One of the primary reasons Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead is because of eyewitness testimony. Without the eyewitness testimony of those who saw him alive after the crucifixion, it would be hard to make a case for the resurrection. In *Acts 10*, for example, the apostle Peter addressed Gentiles gathered in the home of a centurion named Cornelius. Peter, referring to himself and some fellow believers with him, said, “We were witnesses to all that [Jesus] did in Judea and Jerusalem,” meaning that they actually saw with their own eyes what Jesus did throughout his earthly ministry.

Then Peter, speaking of Jesus’ death and resurrection, said Jesus appeared “not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses.” This is one of at least 10 references in Acts to eyewitnesses affirming the resurrection of Jesus, and there are several verses elsewhere in the New Testament that allude to it as well. Paul even reported that Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers “at one time,” in his 1st letter to the Corinthian church.

But wait. Eyewitness testimony? In court cases, and the reversal of criminal convictions, eyewitness testimony has often been problematic. Take the case of Kirk Bloodsworth, for example. In 1984, he was convicted of the murder of a young girl and sentenced to the gas chamber. His conviction was based largely on the testimony of five eyewitnesses. But after he served nine years in prison, DNA testing proved him to be innocent. A report by the Innocence Project (an organization that uses DNA testing to exonerate those wrongfully convicted of crimes) says that since the 1990s, when DNA testing was first introduced, **73** percent of **239** convictions that were overturned through DNA testing were based on eyewitness testimony.

Similarly, there’s research showing that **75** percent of false convictions are caused by an inaccurate eyewitness statement. This is attributed to factors such as memory decay, poor eyesight, induced stress, and something known as **eyewitness talk**. If you don’t know

that that is, basically this happens when witnesses are discussing what they thought they saw at a crime scene and later they change their testimony based on the statements of other witnesses.

With all of this in mind, we come to the story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples on the day of his Resurrection when Thomas was not present. When Thomas later arrives, his colleagues tell him what they've seen, but Thomas is not convinced. He's hearing eyewitness talk from no fewer than at least 10 of his friends, all of whom have spent a lot of time with Jesus and certainly shouldn't have had any problem identifying him. But Thomas is nobody's fool.

People don't get up and walk around after they're dead and buried, so the eyewitness testimony, no matter that it's unanimous in claiming Jesus is alive, isn't enough to sway him. But then, a week later, Thomas finds himself face to face with Jesus and is invited to touch the nail prints in his hands and the wound in his side. As we know, Thomas blurts out, "My Lord and my God!" and Jesus' response almost sounds like a scolding: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." In other words, it's like Jesus is saying, "You should have believed the eyewitness testimony, Thomas. Shame on you!"

Isn't that odd? Thomas' reservations were completely understandable, and in terms of today's forensic and legal processes, not only understandable, but necessary. And our Lord must have known that! "Seeing is believing," is a fairly common thing for us to say these days, but Jesus seems to want it the other way around: "Believing is seeing," or in the latin *Credo ut intelligam*, as Anselm of Canterbury would put it centuries later. And certainly that's how it has to be for the rest of us who follow Christ. Although the New Testament does speak of eyewitnesses, our conviction that Jesus is a living Lord doesn't start there, but rather it starts with faith!

But, perhaps if we call Jesus' statement to Thomas a scolding, we have actually misread it. In fact, more than likely the Lord is merely making an observation wherein he pronounces a special blessing on those who believe without eyewitness testimony:

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” as if Jesus is proclaiming another beatitude that could be added to the words he declared during his sermon on the mount. In other words what Jesus is saying is, “If you need to have evidence, fine, but you are really blessed if you can believe without it.”

Certainly, Jesus’ statement tells us that what is required in this earthbound world in terms of evidence, testimony, and proof is not a currency in the kingdom of God. What’s required for our spiritual lives is faith, which the writer of Hebrews describes as the “evidence of things not seen.” C.S. Lewis once famously remarked that he believed in Christianity just like he believed in the sun: “Not only because I see it,” he said, “but because by it I see everything else.”

Picking up on Lewis’ comment, Brandon Ambrosino, who covers culture and religion for a website called Vox.com, wrote, “That’s how I see Jesus’ resurrection; not so much an event I look at, but as an event I look through. For me, it remains the interpretive key to the entire universe. And though it might seem improbable and primitive, we’re all aware that the idea is written across both our imaginations and even the cosmos. Each morning, the sun is reborn; each spring, harvests come back to life; after each disappointment, our dashed hopes are reanimated, and soar to even newer heights.

He continues, “For all the death and evil and greed and ugliness of our world, I can’t shake the fact that every last atom of this place is pulsing in time with the rhythm of resurrection!” So as we gather on this Sunday after Easter, it’s not to look for more evidence to confirm that the resurrection of Jesus happened, but to celebrate how it helps us interpret the world, and to receive from it both our daily hope and our long-term optimism.

Eyewitnesses can be mistaken when they testify to what they saw, or think they saw. But that’s not true in every case, and sometimes eyewitnesses help authorities grasp the impact of what has happened. Consider a story by Pastor and author Stan Purdum, called *Eyewitnesses*: “It couldn’t have been him,” the distraught woman said. “I talked to him not more than an hour ago.” The police officer shifted uneasily on his feet.

These things were never easy. “I’m so sorry, ma’am,” he said, “but we identified him from his driver’s license. And the car was registered in his name as well.”

“Well, it’s got to be a mistake. It’s not him,” the incredulous women demanded! “Actually,” replied the officer, “we will need someone to formally identify him.” “I’ll do it.” That was from the lady’s 16-year-old son, Ryan. She didn’t know how long he had been standing behind her, but suddenly she was glad he was there. He was such a levelheaded boy. He’d be able to straighten out this colossal mistake. One look and he’d know the man lying in the morgue was not his father. And then the police could put their energies into finding out who the unfortunate driver was. “Thank you, Ryan,” she said. Then turning to the officer, she added, “My son will go with you, and you’ll see. It’s not my Tom you’ve got there.”

The starch in her voice was almost convincing, but both the officer and Ryan noticed the quiver in her lip. “Is there someone we can call for you first?” the officer asked. “Not necessary,” the woman replied, gathering her courage. The man continued, “You’ll have Ryan back in no time. You’ll see.” It was less than an hour later when Ryan came back. But as he opened the door, his mother took one look at him and knew the awful truth. They crumpled into each other’s arms, crying and sobbing in their grief.

Now imagine what it may have been like for the followers of Jesus after the eye witness reports from the women at the tomb. “It couldn’t have been him,” Philip said. “They crucified him. All Jerusalem saw it. Nobody could have survived that. He’s dead. I didn’t want to believe it, but it’s true.” Mary Magdalene could hardly stand still, even though she’d run all the way from the tomb. “But it was him,” she said. “He spoke to me!” “John and Peter have been to the tomb also and found it empty!”

“Yes. They told me,” Philip responded, “But all that proves is that his body has been moved!” Mary realizing that Philip was not going to be convinced by anything she said, eased up a bit and simply told him, “You just wait. You’ll see.” Much later that day, she entered the house where the Eleven had been staying. Except for Thomas, they were all there. And all 10 of them were sobbing for great joy.

Afterwards, Thomas would also have a similar encounter with the Risen Jesus and he too would weep with joy as he declared words of faith that were very personal, deep, and emotional. And Thomas and his confession in the person of Christ, "My Lord and my God!" is one that provides us with a foundation for our own faith! It's a faith that doesn't subscribe to the old adage, "Seeing is believing," but rather the Jesus inspired-brand of faith that reminds us that "believing is seeing."

God has come to us in Jesus Christ, who continues his mission through doubters and misfits like Thomas and like us. Faith is a willingness to follow him, even when we're not sure where it will lead us. Faith is a willingness to do ministry and mission in the name of Christ because we have experienced his Love and Grace firsthand. So let's embrace the truth we learn from Thomas and that is, "doubts may not always lead to us to answers, but they most certainly can lead to us to growth! And thanks be to Go for that. Amen.