

Back in my undergraduate days, we were taught that when you write a paper, you ought to have something called a thesis statement. That thesis statement was supposed to capture, in one sentence, the point you were trying to make. Having a thesis statement was supposed to help give your paper focus and a clear direction. One of my seminary professors taught us that sermons should also include a thesis statement that serves the same purpose. You will have to be the judge of whether or not this message has focus and clear direction. All I can say is, I try!

At the very end of today's Gospel Lesson, we are presented with what I believe to be a purpose statement. I see it as the mission statement of John's Gospel and indeed all of the Bible. John writes: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; 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." The purpose of the Bible is to create faith in Jesus; faith that gives godly life. Now maybe that's stating the obvious, but these days the obvious needs to be stated.

Look around. More and more people are willing to say, "I don't believe in any god." Books like "The God Delusion," "God Is Not Great," and "Living Without God" are best sellers. Many powerful voices in our infotainment culture are sending this message. Much has been written, blogged and posted about the 'nones,' who, when asked to identify a religious tradition claim none.

On one hand, this is obviously not good news. But on the other hand, you shouldn't be too shocked. Doesn't the Bible tell us that by nature we are turned away from God? The story of Noah records this stunning commentary: "The LORD saw that the people on earth were very wicked and in their hearts were always thinking only evil" (Genesis 6:5). Doesn't the apostle Paul use terms like "slaves to sin" and "dead in trespasses and sins" to describe the spiritual condition of mankind? God's Word gets it right. God's Word is what's shocking, because it says we're all atheists to begin with—until the Lord God reclaims us through His Word and baptismal water. More people today are candid about their lack of faith, and that ought to trouble us. But keep in mind that an atheist is giving expression to our default setting as human beings. We are by nature sinful and unclean. We cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him. We were born into disbelief.

And that's what makes today's Gospel reading so powerful. It deals realistically with doubt and disbelief, within the circle of Jesus' own disciples. Not only does it point out the problem—it offers the solution.

Today we are re-introduced to Jesus' disciple Thomas. Yes, good old doubting Thomas. It sure would be easy to throw good old doubting Thomas under the bus; to say: "Boy, what an idiot! How could he doubt the Lord's resurrection?" It might feel good to know we're superior to one of Jesus' own students. But your conscience won't let you, will it?

Can we claim to have never doubted God's reality? Can we really claim to have never wondered if Jesus actually cares about us? Can we honestly claim to have never lashed out at God—to have never shaken our fist at Him or threatened to pull away from Him when He doesn't do things our way? Our maybe your doubt and disbelief is a little more boring than all that. Maybe Jesus doesn't really cross your mind during the course of a normal day. Maybe your brief morning prayer eventually becomes no prayer at all. Maybe you would never dream of abandoning the Christian label—even though you've quietly slipped into a life of practical atheism, where God is not the enemy, just irrelevant.

So what does Jesus do in the face of doubt and disbelief? Look here: When He appeared to Thomas, it was not to kick him out of the group but to speak peace to him and to forgive him. Thomas was given the privilege of seeing His resurrected teacher—but this story is just as much about what didn't happen. Thomas was not told to get out. He was allowed to remain with Jesus and see the visible signs of his forgiving love—the visible scars in his glorified body. That, John writes, is how Thomas' faith was restored.

And then, it's like John turns directly to you and looks you right in the eye and says: 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. The Word of God exists to give you faith. These stories about Jesus, reported by eyewitnesses, have been handed down through time to convince you that Jesus is the Savior God promised. These events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are relayed to you so that you will trust him for forgiveness and lasting help. The Holy Spirit accompanies every word of Holy Scripture, actively working to create faith in Jesus. And where there is faith in Jesus, there is life. Not just "life" meaning something that is alive, but "life" meaning existence with purpose and enjoyment of God's gifts and love that never ends. All of that comes from exposure to and belief in the Word of God.

It is therefore of utmost importance that you put yourself in the position to let God's Word speak to you. Being a Christian means knowing the God who defines Himself in Holy Scripture—not the God of your imagination or your own preferences. You and I need a constant stream of God's Word to keep that picture of Jesus sharp. Otherwise we start to sink back into old doubts and fears. I would go so far as to say that whatever amount of God's Word you're getting into your every day life...you need more. That goes for me too.

I can think of so many times when I have had some stress cloud my vision, going through the day tired and distracted, or saddened by some bad news. And then, in some way, God's Word breaks through the fog, whether in a devotion, or hearing someone speak it, or reading it somewhere. God's strong Word shatters the dark mood and sets things right. Jesus speaks His peace to my heart. I am brought face to face with his wounds and his risen life. I am reminded that Jesus' story is also my story and my faith centers on Him. That is what the Word does for me and I know it can do the same for you. How do I know that? Because that's why it's there. These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by

believing you may have life in his name. Get His words into your life and let them do what they're meant to do.