

## **“Is Seeing Really Believing?”**

**John 20:19-31**

**Here it is, the week after Easter, and the flowers are gone from the sanctuary and everything has pretty much shifted back to business as usual. After a week of well-attended worship services it looks like some people have decided to take a deep breath and wait to get back into their regular routine next week, or for the Christmas and Easter attenders, until December. And it is more than a little intriguing to read in our Scripture Lesson for this morning what the first followers of Jesus were doing on the Sunday which marked their first Sunday after that first Easter. John tells us in his Gospel that they were still fearful, hiding behind locked doors. And at least one of them, Thomas, simply did not believe that they had seen the Son of God risen from the dead.**

**In our Scripture Lesson for this morning we hear John tell us what happened on that Sunday night when the eleven disciples were once again gathered in the upper room and the risen Christ appeared to them. After His initial greeting, “Peace be with you,” the Lord’s first words are to Thomas as He says, “Put your finger here; see My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Stop doubting and believe.” To which Thomas responds, “My Lord and My God!” And then Jesus makes this thought-provoking statement: “Because you have seen Me, you believe; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” This morning I’d like us to spend a few minutes thinking together about what it means for us to believe, and what kind of seeing it takes to have a faith which saves.**

**The place where I’d like us to begin, is with some thoughts about what kinds of things are wrapped up in that word ‘believe.’ More often than not, it seems to me that believing usually has to do with what I would call intellectual assent. By that, I mean that when we say that we believe something, we are acknowledging the fact that a certain proposition is true. We believe that the earth is round and travels around the sun. We believe that exercise is good for our bodies and that eating too much candy is probably not. We believe that those huge jet planes can actually get off the ground and take us where we want to go. We know in our heads that certain things are true and trustworthy. And there is definitely a place for that kind of believing when it comes to the Christian faith. We believe that certain propositions are absolutely true.**

**But beyond that kind of believing, which is primarily a matter of intellectual assent, there is that sense of believing which involves a commitment on our part to act on what we know to be the truth. An example I often use with young people has to do with what I just said about those jumbo jets and their ability to get off the ground and fly off into the wild blue yonder. I can stand at the airport and watch those planes take off and know in my head that it is safe to fly on one of them. But the ultimate proof of my belief takes place when I make a commitment to climb on board one of those jets and let it take me to my destination. The key is in that word commitment. We take believing to a higher level when we choose to act on whatever it is that we say we believe. That, too, is an essential element in Christian faith.**

**But when God's Word talks about believing, the underlying notion has to do with having faith in a person, specifically the Person of Jesus Christ. Such believing is based on knowing in our heads that certain things about Him are true. But it moves beyond intellectual assent to commitment, which in this case is a matter of trust. In the Scriptures belief is most often described in terms of a personal relationship rooted in trust and love. And that commitment to the Person of Jesus Christ is intended to find its expression in a life which builds its thoughts and actions on the truth of who He is and on what He has accomplished in His life, death, resurrection, ascension and promised return at the end of the ages. To believe, as a Christian, is to entrust our lives to Jesus and to live our lives as those who belong to Him.**

**Our Scripture Lesson from John's Gospel reveals some very helpful insights when it comes to understanding what it means to believe in the risen Son of God. For instance, John informs us that a week after seeing Jesus in His resurrection body, His closest followers and friends are still hiding behind locked doors because they are still afraid of the religious and secular authorities. That tells me that just because we believe that the Lord is alive and present with us doesn't mean that we have completely grasped what all that implies for us in our present situations or in the days which lie ahead. On that first Sunday after Easter the disciples haven't yet realized that they have nothing to fear from anyone or anything, that nothing can ever separate them from the love God has for them in Christ Jesus.**

**The fact that Thomas is present with the other disciples a week after Easter also tells me something about the process by which we come to faith and belief in the risen Christ. Thomas has long been known as 'the Doubter,' because he tells the other disciples, "Unless I see the nail marks in His hands and put my hand into His side, I will not believe it." Yet even in his doubts, there seems to be a whisper of a hope, that what his friends have shared might be true. For why else would Thomas be present with the other ten disciples on that week after Easter unless deep in his heart there was a kind of hoping against hope, that Jesus might really be alive? Otherwise Thomas would have gotten as far away from Jerusalem and the danger the Lord's followers still faced. So I find that quite often the process of believing begins with a longing that what we're questioning will actually turn out to be true.**

**Which leads me to conclude that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but disbelief. The dictionary defines disbelief as a refusal or inability to believe something. But those who truly doubt always maintain an openness to the possibility that they may be wrong or mistaken, and that what seems to be impossible or unlikely, may indeed be true. To my way of thinking, disbelief involves a steadfast refusal to believe that something may in fact be true. It involves a certain stubbornness, or hardness of heart, to use a biblical term, which is closed to the possibility that that which is doubted could ever be true. Disbelief involves a choice, a refusal on the part of disbelievers, to entertain the idea that they may be wrong, or that there is truth beyond what they already know and think, or can see and touch.**

**But my sermon title asks the question, “Is Seeing Really Believing?” And a few weeks ago Pastor Karl was sharing with the children the story of Jesus healing a blind man. He told them that there is more than one way to talk about seeing. We not only see with our eyes, we see with our minds and with our hearts. It is a matter of seeing beyond seeing, if you will. And that kind of seeing has a great deal to do with believing. It has to do with comprehending and understanding God’s truth not only at an intellectual level, but at an intensely personal one as well. When the eyes of our minds and hearts have been opened we are enabled to see clearly not only the truth, but its implications for our lives. And it is that which moves us to put our trust in the God whose truth it is.**

**The seeing which leads to believing quite often begins when we start to see ourselves as God sees us. For our Maker sees us as infinitely flawed and as infinitely loved. And it is not until we see ourselves in the light of both those truths that we will come to faith in Christ. We need to see ourselves as sinners in need of a Savior. And we need to see ourselves as individuals who are so precious to our heavenly Father that He is not willing that any of us should perish. But it is only as those truths come together in our minds and hearts that we will turn to Jesus and put our trust in His saving work on our behalf. If we only see ourselves as flawed we end up in despair. If we only see ourselves as loved we will think all is well and become complacent. Taken together, however, those truths will lead to faith.**

**But we not only need to have the eyes of our hearts and minds opened to see the truth about ourselves, we also need to see clearly the truth about Jesus of Nazareth, God the Son and the Savior of the world. Beyond intellectual assent to the facts that He lived and died and is alive forevermore is the ‘seeing’ which makes all that personal to you and me. We need to see that He lived a perfect life on our behalf. We need to see that our disobedience nailed Him to the cross, and that it was for our sins that He took the ultimate responsibility. We need to see that He was raised for our justification, and that He because He lives, we, too, will live. When we see those truths at the center of our being they lead us, even compel us, to confess with our lips and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, and that we are saved.**

**All of which brings me to our Lord’s closing words to Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Our blessings are exactly the same as those of His followers to whom He appeared on that first Easter night. His initial word to them and to us, is, “Peace.” It’s the peace which only He can give. It’s the peace of knowing our sins are forgiven, that we’ve been set right with God, that we no longer need to feel guilty. It’s the peace which comes from knowing that our Savior reigns and that the future is in His nail-pierced hands. We need never be anxious about what tomorrow holds for us. It is the peace which comes from knowing that we will never be alone again, that the risen Son of God will never leave us or forsake us. It is the peace which blesses all those who have not seen and yet believed.**

More than that, we are blessed, as were the disciples on that first Easter night, with a sense of purpose and a reason for being. The risen Christ says to us, as He said to them, “As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.” As you often hear at the end of our worship: “You go nowhere by accident. Wherever you are God is sending you. Wherever you are God has placed you there, and has a purpose in you being there.” The living Christ who indwells you, has something He wants to do through you – right where you are. He has called us to join Him in the work of His Kingdom. We’re to be His witnesses, sharing with others what He has done for us and what He can do for them. No matter how young or old, rich or poor, able or disabled we may be, there is work for us to do. Life in Christ is never without purpose. We are blessed.

And with that purpose and meaning comes the power we need in order to do what we’ve been called to do. As the disciples gathered in the upper room on Easter night their risen Lord not only blessed them with His peace and purpose, He breathed on them, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” At the beginning of his Gospel John writes about Jesus, that, “to as many as received Him and believed in His name, He gave the power to become the children of God.” That power comes to us in the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the living Christ, who takes up residence in every believing heart. It is the Spirit who gives us the power to love others as we have been loved. It is the Spirit who gives us the words we need to be witnesses for Christ. It is the Spirit who enables us to will and do of God’s good pleasure.

My concluding words are to any ‘doubting Thomases’ here this morning. The original Doubting Thomas saw the risen Christ and heard Him say the very words he himself had spoken a week before. I believe that when Thomas spoke those words Jesus was in that room, but didn’t make His risen presence known. I wondered why He didn’t appear at that moment and banish Thomas’ doubts. Perhaps He knew that Thomas needed time to have his hopes and longings reach the point where he was ready to meet his risen Lord. So, if you’re here in spite of your doubts, hoping the Good News may really be true, that the Savior lives and reigns, saves and keeps, and wants you for His own, don’t despair. Just keep coming back Sunday after Sunday to this time of worship and fellowship. The risen Lord is here, and I have no doubt that the day will come when the eyes of your heart will be opened and you will see and believe the Good News of Easter. And you will confess with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” Amen.