

“Believing Without Seeing”

Several years ago a friend of mine told me a rather bizarre story. She was a professor at Furman University and had been invited to a wedding in Northern Greenville County near Tigerville. There are many different types kind of churches in that part of the country and this one did not disappoint. At first things were normal. The groomsmen came in and then the groom and minister stood at the altar. The bridesmaids came down the aisle followed by the bride. But then things changed. Someone set off a dry ice machine and the whole pulpit area was filled with smoke. After a little bit, out of the smoke walked someone who looked just like Jesus. Like the Jesus in those Easter movies. This person went out into the congregation and spoke about the importance of the Christian faith to a marriage. It was quite a performance!

Those people that day got to see Jesus! At least, it was someone who looked like Jesus. The reality is that most Christians who have ever existed or exist today have not seen Jesus in the flesh. I know I haven't. Only a small percentage of Christians who have ever lived saw Jesus. Yet, today about half the world believes in Jesus as their savior. What is it that motivates us? What is it that strengthens our faith? Why do we proclaim the gospel and serve others in the name of Christ? The words of 1 Peter could describe countless Christians today: “Although you have

not seen him, you love him and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable joy.”

It is an amazing story. In 1 Peter 1:3-9, one of our lectionary texts for this week, we look at the reality of faith without seeing. Early Christians in Asia Minor, the recipients of this letter, couldn't say, "I have seen Jesus face to face! I have felt the wounds in his hands!" any more than I, Wally Culp, can say today than I can. In 1 Peter the public questioning of just such unseeing faith looms large. This is perhaps the epistle most keenly aware of a doubting and hostile social context for those who trust in salvation through the one they have not seen. It is full of reminders of the goodness of the unexpected and incorruptible inheritance the audience has received from the creator of the universe through the grace of Christ Jesus. These people need a reminder every once and a while. They were widows and slaves, women married to men who think this whole Christian thing is ridiculous, people of every age surrounded by gentiles, and they need the defensive pep talk of the letter of 1 Peter.

Our Gospel passage today in John 20:19-31 is about the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection. The first appearance occurs on Easter Sunday evening and is when Jesus presents himself to the disciples. John writes that the disciples were behind locked doors when Jesus appeared to them Sunday evening. They

were afraid of the Jewish authorities. These were the authorities who had Jesus arrested and condemned to death. Although we sometimes give the disciples a hard time because none of them except John showed up at Jesus' crucifixion, we need to put their fears in context. The man they had followed for three years had been arrested and crucified. They had good reason to believe that because of their association with Jesus they might suffer the same fate. They truly feared for their lives.

Jesus provides a calming effect on the disciples. He says "Peace be with you." They need to hear this assurance from their leader. Jesus had told them earlier in his farewell discourse in John 15:18-25 that they, the Christian community, will experience the world's hatred and persecution. Jesus now assures them that they do not have to be anxious but can do their work with the peace of Jesus present.

Jesus displays his wounds in his hands and his side to the disciples. This act on his part displays continuity between the earthly and risen Jesus. It confirms that he is not a ghost. Once the disciples see this display by Jesus, they are filled with joy. He once again says "Peace be with you." Their fear has turned to happiness at realizing they are in the presence of the risen Jesus.

Jesus then sends out the disciples to continue the work of making God in Jesus known to world. This is the first significant act of the Christian community. When Jesus says “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven,” Jesus is talking about the commission to the disciples to bring the world to the moment of decision and judgment in regard to sin. In John 3:16, John has written that each person has to make a decision in regard to whether they will believe in God’s saving grace through Jesus. The disciples will bear witness to the love of God in Jesus. They will tell the world how those in it can have eternal life.

In his sending out of the disciples, we also read that Jesus breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Jesus empowered his disciples with the Holy Spirit. He had told them earlier in his farewell discourse that he would not leave them alone, that he would give them the Paraclete, the one who would stand alongside them and would guide them in all truth. When John writes that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples, this describes a new, second creation for those who receive the Holy Spirit. The verb used for breath in this passage is described as the same verb used to describe God breathing the breath of life into the first human in Genesis 2:7. What John shows by his description of Jesus’ act is those who believe in Jesus receive life as children of God and the Holy Spirit is the breath that sustains new life.

John makes clear that the gift of the Holy Spirit and the articulation of the faith community's mission are intimately tied to the cross, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. When the church celebrates Easter, it must also celebrate the beginnings of its mission. When the disciples receive the Spirit from Jesus they are commissioned with the authority to bring his forgiveness and reconciliation to the world.

We then read about Jesus' appearance to Thomas. The story of the commissioning of the faith community now functions to showcase the question of faith in the resurrection. For some reason Thomas was not present at Jesus' Easter Sunday appearance. The other disciples tell him that they have seen Jesus. Thomas states that unless he sees the nail marks in Jesus' hands and touches his wounds, he will not believe Jesus has risen. For his reaction, he has traditionally been called a "Doubting Thomas" and used as a figure of speech.

Thomas has been unfairly characterized as "doubting." How many of us in his position would have done the same thing? In my opinion, I believe just about all of us would have reacted in the same way. As discussed earlier, Thomas was in fear for his life because of what had happened to Jesus. He was probably absent on Easter Sunday because he really went into hiding. Why should he risk his life

based on the sayings of others? It was perfectly reasonable for him to demand actual proof of Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus makes available to Thomas exactly what he needs for his faith. He tells Thomas he can put his finger in his wounds, his hand in his side. He can look at his wounds. Jesus does not chastise Thomas. The offer of Jesus' grace leads Thomas to a confession of faith. It is another demonstration of Jesus' care for his sheep.

Thomas then makes one of the most powerful confessions of faith in the Gospels, "My Lord and My God." Thomas acknowledges that God is fully revealed in Jesus. He reaffirms John 1:1, "the Word was God." Thomas recognizes that the risen Jesus is the incarnate Logos, the divine Son of God. What is important to remember is that it is not touching Jesus that leads Thomas to this confession of faith but Jesus' gracious offer of himself.

So what do these resurrection stories mean to use today? As Jesus says to Thomas in v. 29, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. Seeing Jesus is not required for faith in the resurrection and new life in Jesus. Jesus provides a blessing for those who have yet to come in the faith. The next generations of believers will not be able to see Jesus himself. John, in writing his gospel, draws explicit attention to the role of resurrection stories in bringing people to faith, and he suggests that the Gospel narrative itself gives its readers the

words that make faith in Jesus possible for those who live after the first generation of disciples.

What John writes in v. 31 presents the Gospel narrative itself as the focus of revelation to later generations. These verses suggest that an engagement with the biblical text, with its offer and interpretation of God, is vital to the life of faith. What we realize is that, in preaching and teaching these texts, in meditating on them, and in prayer, it is, indeed, possible to believe without actually having seen the risen Christ in person. We are blessed and strengthened by the Spirit of Christ as we lean into the promises and wisdom of the central apostolic teachings. As one deacon at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in San Diego put it, "I believe because over the years my gut and my heart and my head have come to agree that it's true."

When I think about meditating on the word of God, it reminds me of Saint Teresa of Avila, who wrote *The Interior Castle*. Teresa was a 17th century mystic who focused on prayer and meditation as a way to reach and become closer to God. I read her book in seminary. When we in Spain last November, we saw where she lived. Her book is a journey of faith that goes through seven stages ending with union with God. She explained it as a way to know firsthand that "God was in them and they were in God." In a series of prayer experiences spanning many

years, Christ Jesus came to work with her with an intimacy and power that she, like Thomas, could not deny.

Teresa and the best of the Christian tradition will never let us fall into a division of seeing and unseeing faith. For her, it was all part of one journey towards unity with the God at the center, a journey not defined by any extraordinary experience. The emphasis from 1 Peter: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow in salvation---if indeed you have tasted that the lord is good” (2:2-3). As the early church knew, there were many ways of tasting, glimpsing, and seeing the goodness of the Lord. And God will give us the sort of food we need to do the work we must.