

# “Seeing Is Not Believing”

John 20:19-31

Christ is risen!! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia!!

On that first Easter evening, Peter and John have seen the empty tomb. They have seen the burial linen and the face cloth which had covered Jesus’ head folded up by itself. They had seen all this, and they were filled with fear. You can’t really blame them for having fear. Their locking of the doors was justified.

The Jewish leaders had posted soldiers outside of the tomb because, as they had said to Pontius Pilate, they were suspicious of the disciples who might come and steal the body and then claim that Jesus rose from the dead. And now the body is not in the tomb, and the story is being circulated that the disciples indeed did come and steal the body while the ALL guards were sleeping.

So, it would be correct to assume that the disciples thought that the Jewish leaders would be looking for the 12 (now reduced to 11 because Judas is no longer with them); and they would want to find the 11 and nail them to crosses if they could. As the saying goes, “Dead men tell no tales.” And with the disciples

dead, the story of the sleeping guards could circulate unchallenged. The disciples have seen enough to know that this is a possibility. All that they have seen has created fear. All that they have seen has not created faith. Seeing is not believing. Faith comes by hearing. Faith comes through the Word of God.

Jesus told them, on at least three different occasions, that He must go to Jerusalem, be handed over to the chief priests, be crucified, and rise from the dead. The disciples did not hear His words. Last week, we witnessed Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and she did not recognize Him by looking at Him. Only when He called her by name and said, “Mary,” did she recognize Him. “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him.”

Jesus then told Mary Magdalene to go and tell the disciples that He is risen. Mark’s Gospel tells us that when they heard Mary’s words, the disciples “would not believe it.” Peter and John go to the tomb, they see that it is open; they see that it is empty. They see the linen and the face cloth. They believe that He is no longer in the tomb, but, as we heard from John’s Gospel last week, “as yet they did not understand from Scripture that He must rise from the dead.” This is John talking about what John was thinking. Seeing is not believing.

This brings us to Thomas. Thomas is often referred to as “Doubting Thomas.” What Thomas expresses is not “doubt.” This is not “questioning in the

back of his mind” skepticism. Thomas was “unbelieving.” That is what the word actually means. Thomas “unbelieved.” He has no faith. The Greek grammar in the text is very particular in that Thomas expresses that he basically thinks the resurrection is impossible and that he does not expect to put his finger in the mark of the nails.

A few weeks ago in our Gospel reading, when Jesus tells the disciples that Lazarus had died and Jesus says, “Let us go to him.” Thomas boldly says, in the comfort of his friendly surroundings, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” He wasn’t really expressing confidence in the resurrection back then either, if you think about it. But now, we get to hear about how Thomas really reacted to death and the concept of the resurrection when the climate around him was less comfortable. “Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” [Jn. 20:25].

This is not simply doubt. This is outright unbelief. This is anger expressing an outright denial of the power of God. He has no faith. Thomas needs to become a Christian. Thomas was “unbelieving.” So eight days later, Thomas is with the disciples, and the doors are still locked, and the disciples still don’t really understand what they are going to do now (And they won’t until Pentecost). But Jesus appears once again and says, “Peace be with you.”

And He says to Thomas, "Put your finger here . . . Put your hand in my side. . . Stop being an unbeliever." I am pretty sure Thomas did not poke Jesus to see if He is real. Faith is created and Thomas says, "My Lord and my God."

And Jesus asks a rhetorical question, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" And the answer is, No, because seeing is not believing. The Word of God is what creates believing. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. Certainly Thomas got to see and hear Christ, but he did not believe because of seeing. The word of Christ has "called him by the Gospel, enlightened him with His gifts, sanctified and kept him in the one, true faith," as Luther says in the catechism.

Our human nature, like Thomas, will always say, "I will never believe." Our Old Adam hates God. Then Jesus brings peace. "Peace be with you." And, like Thomas, we say, "My Lord and my God." And each time the Word of God is spoken, when the Absolution is said, when the Word of God is joined to the waters of Baptism, or comes to you under the form of bread and wine, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Amen.

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