

“Believing Is Seeing”  
John 20:19-31  
April 24, 2022

Well, I guess Easter is over for another year. The lilies that covered our altar area are gone; attendance is down from last week when we needed 3 worship services instead of 2 in order to accommodate everyone who joined us for worship; the Easter outfits are no longer “new;” and students have returned to school. Things are pretty much back to what we call “normal,” back to the old pre-Easter routine.

In fact, in many churches across the country today worship is being led by a visiting or retired pastor, as many full-time pastors and church workers often take the week after Easter off. Why? Because 6 or 7 weeks of Lent leading up to Easter tends to be a very busy time with extra worship services, choirs and musicians conducting additional rehearsals in preparation for Holy Week and Easter services, and activities such as an Easter breakfast, egg hunts, and outdoor sunrise services all require additional planning, volunteers, and equipment. All of this preparation then reaches its climax on Easter morning. For pastors, church workers, and volunteers, Easter worship is like the Super Bowl of all worship services; it is the NCAA finals all rolled into one. If you’ve got a good sermon or some great songs, you had better have them ready for Easter. After all, not only is Easter the holiest day of the year for the church, it is also the only chance that a pastor, a director of family ministries, or a musician may have to communicate the good news of Jesus’ resurrection to people who are visiting or who may only come to church a few times a year.

Last Sunday I’m sure many churches throughout the country were full, but probably not today as many people have returned to their normal Sunday routine, whatever that may be. Others may not be in a church today because despite the fact that we just celebrated our Savior, Jesus, rising from the dead, our world does not appear to have changed one bit as a result of it. There is still

war taking place in Ukraine, the pandemic continues, inflation and supply chains are still causing challenges, and for some people they are still having health struggles or maybe they heard a doctor say to them last week, “I’m sorry, there is nothing we can do,” and they may wonder, “What good does it do to worship Jesus? Nothing changes.” I’m sure we’ve all had our moments where we have questioned Jesus and had our doubts about the future; and according to our Gospel lesson for today, we’re actually in some pretty good company when we have those thoughts.

In this text we see the disciple, Thomas, expressing doubts about this unbelievable story the other disciples were telling him, “We have seen the Lord.” Thomas was not with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them on Easter, so why should Thomas believe their story? After all, Thomas saw Jesus die, and nobody rises from the dead. So how could Jesus be alive? It just didn’t make sense. Therefore, Thomas insists, “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.”

Is there anything wrong with Thomas insisting on seeing something before he believes it? I mean, in our lives if you are buying a car or a house or anything, it’s probably a good idea to see if what the seller is telling you is true. Likewise, we have another set of elections taking place this year in our area and it is probably a good idea to check the claims made by various candidates to see if they are true. So “seeing is believing” is definitely a good philosophy for us in this world.

But what happens when we apply this philosophy to the meaning of life? What do we see when we look for answers to the hard questions of life? Consider Thomas, he spent a whole week living in doubt. I’m sure it was very difficult, after all, his friends were all excited about the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. But Thomas was stuck to only what he had seen: Jesus’ suffering, death, and burial. For a whole week Thomas was holding on to death instead of the

good news of life. And that is how we are if we cannot see anything beyond death or if we reject Jesus' resurrection. Death is the ultimate reality for each one of us. Everyone dies. So if seeing is believing, meaning if our hope and confidence are based only on what we see and experience, that this life is all there is and everything ends in death, then our lives are pointless. It doesn't matter who we are or what we do; it all ends the same way – with death.

Unless there is something more to our human existence than what we see. Or we could say unless there is someone from outside of what we see and experience who can make a difference in the face of death. And this brings us back to Easter. For there is someone who has made a difference, an eternal difference, in the human story. Someone who experienced the reality of death, but who did not allow death to have the last word. And that someone is Jesus, who said in our second lesson today from Revelation, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." When Jesus died on Good Friday and was placed in His tomb, the world thought it is over - Jesus was gone. But it wasn't over, because on the third day Jesus rose from the dead and in that single act Jesus changed the destiny of humankind forever, for life now has the last word, instead of death. And with the gift of life comes everything else that makes life worth living.

Consider again what it is we see in ourselves and others – weaknesses, faults, failures – things the Bible calls sin and declares them to be the cause of death. But the victory of Jesus over death was also His victory over sin, for He who had come to take on not only our nature, (as God became a human being), but also our burden – as He took our sin and our punishment upon Himself. He resisted every temptation the devil threw at Him, He suffered every punishment that God ever imposed, and then rose from death, triumphant over it all. And that great victory is what Jesus now offers to us in His Word through the power granted on Easter as He said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." No conditions, no strings attached, just forgiveness

and all that follows – a restored relationship with God today and eternal life in God’s heavenly kingdom for all who put their trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Savior.

We should note that Thomas was not the only disciple to initially doubt the resurrection. The disciples, minus Thomas, were all in a locked room on Easter, hoping no one would find them, even though the women had told them that Jesus’ tomb was empty. They even doubted after some of them went to see the empty tomb themselves. But when Jesus appeared to them, when they saw Jesus on Easter they believed, and Thomas wanted the same thing.

So a week later, the disciples were again inside a locked room and Thomas was with them; and all of a sudden Jesus appeared among them, and again He said, “Peace be with you,” so that Thomas could be comforted and know that he was forgiven, just like the others. He showed Thomas his hands and side, He told Thomas to touch Him, and to stop doubting and believe. For those who believe that Jesus is risen and that He forgives just as He forgave all of His disciples, everything is different, as there is meaning and purpose to our human lives. That doesn’t mean that life will always be good, wonderful, and easy. Our lives are filled with challenges, hurts, sorrow, and disappointment. But in the midst of all that we see, there is a hope that rests on the victory of Jesus over death, knowing that when this life is over, we will go on living with God until on the Last Day we will rise again with glorified bodies just like Jesus. Then we will see with our eyes what for now we only believe. For now, we see that simply by faith, as believing is seeing.

We don’t yet see with our eyes, but where there is sin, Jesus offers forgiveness; where there is hurting, Jesus offers hope; and where there is sorrow, Jesus offers life. All of this is sure and certain, because God is greater than our sight. “Seeing is believing” may be appropriate for buying a product, but when it comes to sin and forgiveness, death and life, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” said Jesus. For us, believing comes first and holds on

to Jesus, our risen and triumphant Lord, and while I cannot physically see Him today, I know without a doubt someday I will and that gives me hope in all circumstances.