

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER, C
Acts 5:27-32
Revelation 1:4-8
John 20:19-31

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
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I remember when a friend of mine came to Easter worship. She wasn't a regular churchgoer, so I was eager to hear how that experience was for her. She said she came away impressed with the music and festivities, but she also came away with some serious questions about faith. Sitting there surrounded by lilies and trumpets and resurrection celebration, she found herself wondering, "Do I really *believe* this stuff?"

Do I actually *believe* this claim about God saving the world through something that happened two thousand years ago? On Easter, of all Sundays, there's just no way to hedge how strange and stark our claim really is. Christ has died and risen to bring new life to all people. I'm glad my friend took that claim seriously enough to wrestle with it. I respect her for that.

And I'm certain she wasn't alone in her questions on Easter Sunday, or any Sunday. In fact, I hope that every single week this sanctuary holds worshippers who bring along their questions and doubts and skepticism about the Christian faith. And I'm sure there are plenty of doubts and questions stirring around here this morning, which is good because today's scripture has something to say to each one of us, when we find ourselves in that place of asking, "Do I really *believe* this stuff?"

The scripture first shows us the disciples gathered on Easter night, shut away from the public, afraid the people who caused Jesus' death will come after them too. They are grieving, bewildered, ashamed of their cowardice, wondering whether they could have been deceived in respecting their teacher so much. His death looks like a sign that God has rejected both Jesus and them.

Suddenly, into their midst steps the Risen Christ – alive! With a word of peace he reassures them. He breathes the new life of the Holy Spirit into them, so they are revived just as he is. Later on they try to explain it all to Thomas, the latecomer who missed this incredible experience. But Thomas refuses to catch their excitement:

Do you expect me to just *believe* all this stuff you're telling me? "Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

It's not that he's being stubborn or obstinate. Thomas is asking nothing more or less than the same proof and privilege his friends had. And wonderfully, graciously,

Christ honors his request.

One week later, on the Sunday after Easter (*this* Sunday, in fact)-- Christ comes to them again. "Reach out your hand... Do not doubt, but *believe*." At that, Thomas gives voice to the mightiest confession of faith in all John's gospel. Looking upon the wounded, Risen Christ, Thomas declares: "My Lord and my God!"

This verse marks the original ending to John's gospel— so Thomas's magnificent confession is actually the climax of the whole story. And Christ's response to Thomas is the crowning word:

Thomas, Christ says, You have believed because you have seen me. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

These final words seem like they could be spoken directly to us-- and actually, they are. "Blessed are those who have *not* seen the Risen Christ and yet have come to believe." That's us!

We are like Thomas, arriving not just a few hours late, but twenty centuries late. What we *wouldn't give* to touch our Lord's hands and side and be *sure* the resurrection story was true!

For centuries Christians have prayed for encounters and visions to bring God's reality home to them in an unmistakable way. But for some reason we don't understand, proof like that is not usually granted. We have no physical or scientific evidence that God exists. No logical or intellectual proof that Christ is real. And as for personal, experiential proof-- visions and miracles do happen, but they are rare gifts, and even though we want them and seek them, we can't command them. So you and I stand in a line of many generations of Christians who've been called to *believe without seeing*.

Which seems like a limitation, or even a curse, certainly not a blessing. How are we to believe what scripture says – that in this ambiguous situation, this uncertain, doubt-filled condition, "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe"? In the Message Bible the word is even stronger. This verse declares that "Even *better* blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing." (Jn 20:29, the Message)

The great writer and preacher Fredrick Buechner has a hunch about this promise of blessing. While it seems to us like a deficit, Buechner suggests that God is leading us into another way of seeing, one that brings deep dimensions of joy and hope. He writes:

“What we have to remember is that our eyes are not all we have for seeing with, maybe not even the best we have. Our eyes tell us that the mountains are green in summer and in autumn are the color of flame. They tell us that the nose of the little girl is freckled, that her hair usually needs combing, that when she is asleep, her cheek is flushed and moist. They tell us that the photographs of Abraham Lincoln taken a few days before his death show a man who at the age of fifty-six looked as old as time. Our eyes tell us that the small country church down the road needs a new coat of paint and that the stout lady who plays the pump organ looks a little like WC Fields and that the pews are rarely more than a quarter filled on any given Sunday.

But all these things are only facts because facts are all the eye can see. Eyes cannot see truth. The truth about the mountains is their great beauty. The truth about the child is that she is so precious that without a moment’s hesitation we would give our lives to save her life if that should somehow ever be necessary. The truth about Abraham Lincoln is a humanness so rich and deep that it’s hard to stand in his memorial in Washington without tears coming to our eyes, and the truth about the shabby little church is that for reasons known only to God it is full of holiness. It is not with the eyes of the head that we see truths like that, but with the eyes of the heart.” (Fredrick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2006, pp. 261-2 – Highly recommended!)

Seeing with the heart is what shows us almost every meaningful experience and relationship in life – including our relationship to God. Buechner points out what maybe you noticed, too, that even when Jesus kindly, graciously showed himself to Thomas, and made that amazing invitation: “Put your finger here, in my hand, in my side” — Thomas didn’t do it. In the end, he didn’t need that physical proof any more. Thomas’ great confession came without him ever touching Jesus at all.

And Buechner says, “It’s as though maybe for the first time in his life it wasn’t just the fact of Jesus that he saw but the truth of Jesus and the truth of who Jesus was for him... [Thomas] had seen [Jesus] with the eyes of his heart, and there was nothing more he could say, nothing more he needed to say.” (p 262)

He goes on to ask, “Have we ever come close to seeing the truth of Jesus the way Thomas did just then?” and reflects:

“I believe we have, more than we know, and I believe that, in the last analysis, those glimpses more than anything else are what bring us to church Sunday after Sunday. I believe we have glimpsed the truth of Jesus in the faces and lives of people we know who have loved and served him... I believe we have glimpsed him in the pages of the Gospels when by some miracle of

grace those pages come alive for us and it is as if we ourselves are the ones he is speaking to when he says, “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28) I believe we have caught sight of him in works of art that have been created to honor him, like the St. Matthew Passion of Bach, or the flaking, faded frescoes of old European churches where he moves like a dream across the walls...

“I believe we have seen him in those rare moments when, moved by his spirit alive within us, we have been able to be Christs to one another and also at those moments when we have resisted his spirit within us and turned away from each other full of a kind of dimness and sadness. Most of all, I believe, we have seen him in our endless longing for him even when we don’t know who it is we are longing for.” (p. 263)

Buechner concludes, “My guess is that Thomas believed not because of what his eyes had seen but because of what his heart had seen. With his eyes he had seen only Jesus the son of Joseph and Mary, a man much like any other man — so many inches tall, so many pounds heavy, hair this color, eyes that color — but with his heart he saw, maybe for the first time in his life, the one he was destined to love and search for and try to follow as best he could for the rest of his days when Jesus was no longer around for him to see with his eyes, any more than he is around for us to see with ours.” (p. 263)

And there it is. In this sense, you and I have seen exactly what Thomas saw, and we still see it today — not with the eyes of our head but with the eyes of our heart. We can thank Thomas for helping us understand that the kind of questioning people often call doubt is really our yearning to know God just as fully as possible. May we never move beyond that yearning. May God lead us further on that path until the final day.

We may never come to certainty about God, this side of eternity. That’s because our journey here on earth is not about certainty. It’s about being open to God, who is infinite, beyond all human seeing or knowing. And still God stretches out God’s hands to us. And blesses us, who do not *see* and yet believe. Thanks be to God. Amen.