

BELIEVING IS SEEING
Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Easter, 2019
John 20:19-31

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel from before, John 20:19-31: ¹⁹ **That Sunday evening the doors had been locked where the disciples were, because they were afraid of the Jews. Then Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you!”**

²⁰ **After He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. So the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.**

²¹ **Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I also am sending you.”**

²² **After He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit! ²³ If you forgive any people’s sins, they have been forgiven; if you retain any people’s sins, they have been retained.”**

²⁴ **However, Thomas, one of the twelve, who was called “The Twin,” was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.”**

He told them, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the marks of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I shall certainly not believe.”

²⁶ **A week later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors had been locked, Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you!”**

²⁷ **Next He told Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at My hands! Take your hand and put it into My side! Stop your unbelief, and believe!”**

²⁸ **Thomas answered Him, “My Lord and my God!”**

²⁹ **Jesus asked him, “Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!”**

³⁰ **Jesus also performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of His disciples, which have not been written in this book. ³¹ However, these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, believing, you may have life in His name.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Scriptures do not tell us much about Thomas. We know he was also called “Didymus,” which means, “the twin.”¹ Although the Scriptures do not say much about the character of Thomas, it does appear especially from John’s Gospel that Thomas had a tendency to look only into the darkest corners of his life. He seemed to anticipate the worst of everything. A perfect example of this was when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Jesus was across the Jordan near where John had been baptising when word reached Him that Lazarus, from Bethany, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, was sick.

At this time, the Jewish leaders were seeking to seize Jesus, as they had determined that they were going to kill Him. Jesus had eluded their grasp once already, but if He returned to Bethany, they were certain to find out, and would try again to seize Him. The disciples warned Jesus of this danger, but Jesus would not change His mind. He would go to Bethany. He was determined to do so, and there would be no talking Him out of it. It was at this point that Thomas spoke up. He said, *“Let us also go, that we may die with Him,”* (John 11:16).

¹ John 11:16

Thomas was being pessimistic. He could see nothing but trouble ahead. He was convinced Jesus was heading straight for a stoning, but if that is what the Lord was determined to do, then Thomas was grimly determined to go and die with Him. You have to admire his courage.

As we fast forward now to our text today, we find Jesus appearing to the disciples behind locked doors. **24 However, Thomas, one of the twelve, who was called “The Twin,” was not with them when Jesus came.**

We aren't told where Thomas was, or why he wasn't with the disciples, but the fact that John stresses Thomas as **“one of the twelve,”** shows us that Thomas should by no means have been absent. He should have been there with the others. It is possible that because of the events of the past week, he was so negative, so pessimistic, and feeling absolutely destroyed, that he was somewhere else wallowing in his own misery. Perhaps Thomas wasn't there because he refused to believe in the resurrection. That's the indication we get when the **other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord,”** and he told them, **“Unless I see the marks of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the marks of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I shall certainly not believe.”** Thomas succeeded in only one thing – keeping himself wretchedly miserable in his unbelief.

“Seeing is believing,” is the normal way of thinking, and yet, in his Gospel today, John challenges us to reverse our normal way of thinking: Not “seeing is believing,” but **“believing is seeing,”** or as Jesus Himself said it, **“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!”**

However, before we talk about what it means to believe while not seeing, let's consider why it's necessary in the first place.

What's wrong with Thomas's attitude? **“Unless I see the marks of the nails in His hands and put my finger into the marks of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I shall certainly not believe.”** What's wrong with insisting on *seeing* something before we accept it?

If you decide to buy a new car, or a house, or anything at all, it's a good idea to test the claims of the seller and see for yourself whether everything is on the up-and-up. Likewise, when it comes to politics, it's wise to listen to the various claims of the candidates and then think them through for yourself: which candidate really makes more sense? So “seeing is believing” is a good philosophy for life in this world.

Yet what happens when we apply it to ultimate questions about the significance, aim, and meaning of human life? What do we *see* when we look for answers to questions like these?

When it comes to such things, we don't see very well. Consider Thomas. What was his situation during that week of doubt? It couldn't have been pleasant. A whole week went by. All of his friends were abuzz with the good news of Jesus' resurrection appearances, but Thomas stuck stubbornly to what he had seen: Jesus suffering, dead, and buried. For a solid week, Thomas was holding on to death instead of the good news of life, and this is exactly our condition too - so many centuries later - if we, like Thomas that first week of the first Easter, reject the resurrection. What are we left with? Only death.

We live in a death-*denying* society. A lot of people don't die at home anymore; they die in a hospital or nursing home. But no matter where they die, we turn the body over to a funeral director, who will make the dead person look as lifelike as possible before they are buried or cremated. It used to be that burial preparation was done by the dead person's loved ones, but now we want to avoid death - avoid seeing it, dealing with it, or confronting it.

We really cannot. In spite of all our best efforts, death is the ultimate reality for each one of us - and every human knows it. The people who are dearest to us die, but so do complete strangers. Poor people die, but so do the rich - the famous and powerful as well as the humble and ordinary, and, one day, so will you and I. Our death is coming. Unavoidably, sooner or later, everybody dies.

If we are honest and open about the meaning of human existence on the basis of what we *see*, that is, death, we have to say: There isn't any. No meaning, no purpose, no significance, because it all ends in death. Not only will *you* cease to see whatever you've accomplished, whatever good you've done, but eventually, so will everybody else. They'll all be dead too, and what good will anybody's anything do anybody? In our efforts to make sense of everything, we discover that it is all nonsense because of death.

If seeing is believing, that is, if our hope and confidence are based only on what we experience, and what we experience is only death, then our lives are pointless. It doesn't matter who we are or what we do; it all ends the same way... dead.

Unless there is something more to human existence than what we see. Or, to put it another way, unless there is *someone* from outside of our 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 - a radical difference - in the human story. Someone for whom death was *a* reality but not *the* reality. Someone who could deny death not just in appearances but in truth.

That Someone is Jesus Christ! In our Second Reading from before we heard, "***Stop being afraid! I am the First and the Last***¹⁸ *and the One Who Lives; and I died, and, Look! I am alive for ever and ever, and I have the keys of death and of Hades,*" (Rev 1:17-18). When death had done its worst, when Jesus was for sure dead - they had pierced His side, they had hauled down His body, and they had put Him into Joseph's tomb - when all that was over, it still wasn't over, because on the third day, He rose from the dead! He said "No!" to death, and He meant it.

In that single act of defiance, Jesus Christ changed the lot and destiny of man: not death but now life has the last word, and with the gift of life comes everything else that makes life worth living.

Consider again what it is we *see* in ourselves as well as others - the weaknesses, the faults, the failures - what the Bible calls sin and declares to be the cause of death. We see our own helplessness. No matter how hard we try, we cannot measure up to God's Law - and we usually don't try all that hard. So we end up living in a world that is filled with sin and its consequences - not only out there but here in our own hearts and lives, and we deserve the death and hell that God threatens against sinners.

But the conquest of Jesus over death was also His victory over sin, for He who had come to assume not only our nature (God became man) but also our burden, our obligation, our sin and its punishment, did so effectively and forever. He resisted every temptation the devil could throw at Him. He suffered every punishment that God ever imposed, and then He arose from death, triumphant over it all.

This great victory is what Christ now offers to us in His Word through the power granted on Easter evening: "**If you forgive any people's sins, they have been forgiven.**" No conditions, no strings attached, just forgiveness and all that follows: eternal life and resurrection are ours through faith.

²⁶ **A week later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors had been locked, Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you!"**

²⁷ **Next He told Thomas, "Put your finger here, and look at My hands! Take your hand and put it into My side! Stop your unbelief, and believe!"**

For those who believe this Word that Jesus is risen and that He forgives just as He forgave Thomas, everything is different: there is meaning and significance to human existence. Our Lord's Word of forgiveness to us is also a Word for others, and we preach it. A world wracked by sin and death is precisely where we spend our lives in loving service to others for the sake of God, who first loved us. Then, when this life is over, we go right on living with God until on the Last Day we rise again with glorified bodies *just like Jesus*. Then we shall see with our eyes what for now we only believe. For now, believing is our seeing, but believing is also the *way to* seeing, the way to seeing Jesus with our eyes for all eternity.

This doesn't mean that we never experience anything bad, anything difficult, or anything dangerous. No, our lives are filled with challenges, hurts, and bereavements. That's what we still see with our eyes and feel with every measure of our senses. But in the midst of pain, sorrow, and loss, there is a certain hope that rests on the victory of Christ. For now, we see that simply by faith. Believing is seeing.

We don't yet see with our eyes, but where there is sin, Christ offers forgiveness; where there is hurting, Christ offers hope; where there is bereavement, Christ offers life. All this is sure and certain, for God is greater than our sight, just as Easter shows us: death, *our* ultimate reality, was not *His* ultimate reality, and what He has obtained, He has obtained for us.

"Seeing is believing." The attitude of *doubting* Thomas - may be perfectly fine for buying a car or casting a vote, but when it comes to sin and forgiveness, death and life, man and God, "**Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed!**"

Believing comes first, for believing grasps hold of what is greater, indeed the greatest. It grasps hold of Christ, the risen and triumphant Lord, and joins Thomas not in doubting but in confessing: "**My Lord and my God!**" Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

God of all grace, mercy, and peace, we praise You that, by raising Jesus from the dead, You have shown that He is Your Son, and our Saviour. We praise You also that our faith stands on the fulfilment of the prophecies about Him in the Old Testament Scriptures, and on the sure record of the apostles as eyewitnesses of the risen Lord. Give us also the witness of Your Spirit that we may firmly believe Your saving truth.

We thank You for the precious gift of eternal life in Your Son. Protect us from the deceptions of the world about us, and enable us to hold firmly to the faith we profess. Deliver us from doubt and despair. Prevent us from being deceived by worthless human wisdom. Fill us with the Spirit of truth and the mind of Christ.

We thank You for Your holy Word. Give us the earnest desire to grow in Your saving truth during our pilgrimage on this earth. Though we see our risen Lord only with the eyes of faith, teach us to love Him, and to rejoice in Him. Keep us in His love that we may at the last receive the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls, and take part in the restoration of all things and the refreshment that it will bring.

Bless Your Church, that it may speak out the Gospel of our risen Saviour faithfully, and with courage and zeal.

Watch over all institutions of learning, that they may produce young people who desire to follow You, serve You, and carry out Your good and gracious will.

Hear the prayers of all who need Your special help and favour. Assure them that You continue to be merciful. When, in Your deep wisdom, You permit any of us to suffer illness or other distress, comfort us, and assure us that You will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to bear. Strengthen us to endure hardship to Your glory and to our own spiritual blessing.

Strengthen the doubting and the faithless. Bring back the forgetful and the straying. Give us Your peace as we go out from here today. All this we pray in the name of Jesus, our risen Lord. Amen.

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5:12-32

¹² Many miraculous signs and wonders were performed among the people by the apostles. All the brethren used to be in unanimity in Solomon's Porch. ¹³ None of the others dared to join with them, but they regarded them highly. ¹⁴ Believers were increasingly being added to the Lord, a large number of both men and women. ¹⁵ As a result, people actually carried the sick out into the streets and laid them down on beds and mats, so that when Peter came at least his shadow might fall on one of them. ¹⁶ A large number of people used to gather even from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those whom unclean spirits troubled, and they were all healed.

¹⁷ Then the high priest and all those who were with him, who were members of the local party of the Sadducees, began to be filled with envy. ¹⁸ They arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹ However, at night the angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out. He said, ²⁰ "Go, and stand in the temple, and keep on telling the people the full message about this life!"

²¹ After they heard that, they went into the temple at daybreak and began to teach. The high priest and those who were with him came and called together the Jewish council, that is to say, all the elders of the people of Israel. Then they sent some men to the prison to have the apostles brought. ²² However, when the officers arrived, they did not find them in prison. They came back and reported, ²³ "We found the prison very securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but, when we opened them, we found no one inside."

²⁴ When the captain of the temple and the high priests heard these reports, they were puzzled about them, wondering what might come of this. ²⁵ Then someone arrived and told them, "Look! The men whom you put in the prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people."

²⁶ Then the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles, but without using force, because they were afraid that the people would stone them. ²⁷ They brought them and made them stand before the Jewish Council, and the high priest

questioned them, ²⁸ and said, "Did we not give you strict orders not to teach using this name? Yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you want to bring this Man's blood on us."

²⁹ Peter and the other apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers has raised Jesus, whom you had murdered by hanging Him on a tree. ³¹ God has exalted Him to His right hand as Prince and Saviour, in order to give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. ³² We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Revelation 1:4-18

⁴ John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from the One-Who-Is and the One-Who-Was and the One-Who-Is Coming, and from the Seven Spirits who are before His throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful Witness, the Firstborn from the dead, and the Ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, ⁶ and has made us a kingdom, priests to God and His Father — to Him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even the men who pierced Him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen.

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, the One-Who-Is and the One-Who-Was and the One-Who-Is Coming, the Almighty.

⁹ I, John, your fellow-Christian and companion with you in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patience in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹ saying: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea!"

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. When I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands Someone like the Son of Man. He was clothed with a robe

that reached down to His feet; and He wore a golden belt around His chest. ¹⁴ His head and His hair were white like wool, white like snow, and His eyes were like a flame of fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In His right hand He was holding seven stars. Out of His mouth came a sharp, double-edged sword, and His face was like the sun when it shines in its strength.

¹⁷ When I saw Him, I fell down at His feet like a dead man. He laid His right hand on me, saying: “Stop being afraid! I am the First and the Last ¹⁸ and the One Who Lives; and I died, and, Look! I am alive for ever and ever, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

John 20:19-31

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