

Believing Is Seeing

John 20: 19-29

Have you ever made a mistake that seems to haunt you forever? Were you, for instance, responsible for your company buying the worst copy machine ever and everybody knows it? They just look at you every time it breaks down? Do people look at you when you go back for a high school or college reunion and whisper, “Isn’t that the guy who dropped the pass and cost us the championship?” Have you ever gone to a family reunion, brought your girlfriend or boyfriend, and your parents seem to love telling about all those adorable and embarrassing things you did while growing up?

Thomas is forever known in Christian history, as the one who doubted. In the Gospel according to John, he becomes *Doubting Thomas*, a title that is unfair even if it is accurate. This story also has an interesting *back story*. In addition, it has given rise to one of life’s truisms: *seeing is believing*. I want to suggest that the opposite is more often true: *believing is seeing*.

What is the story of Thomas? He was called *the Twin*. Some scholars speculate that Thomas was actually the twin brother of Jesus. How tough would that be?

Jesus was preparing to return to the territory near Jerusalem, an area that held great danger for him. It was Thomas who said, “let us also go that we may die with him.” (John 11: 16) He had courage and he was loyal to Jesus.

Jesus did return to Jerusalem and it was there he died on a Roman cross. The grief of Good Friday gave way to the confusion of Easter Sunday. Later that day, the disciples gathered in private. For safety, the doors and windows were locked. Suddenly, Jesus appeared and showed them his hands and side – marks of the crucifixion. Then Jesus breathed on them, giving them the Holy Spirit and his blessing. And Thomas missed it. He was not there, though we don’t know why. The disciples told him all about seeing Jesus – how they had seen the marks in his hands and side, how he had commissioned them to continue his work. “Gee, Thomas, it’s too bad you missed it.”

Maybe he was just naturally skeptical or maybe a little jealous. Whatever the reason, Thomas doubted what the others said they saw. He wanted physical evidence of Jesus’ resurrection – to touch him, to feel the nail print in his hand and the spear wound in his side. “I won’t believe without proof!”

Eight days later, the Sunday after Easter, Jesus came back. This time, Thomas was there and Jesus offered the requested proof. “Feel the nail print. Touch the spear’s wound.” And Thomas fell to his knees and worshipped him: “My Master and my God!” Jesus finished up with a little dig in at Thomas. “Thomas, you only believe because you have seen. The really blessed ones believe without seeing, without proof. You are a doubter, Thomas!”

That’s the story of Thomas, but it may not tell us everything we need to know. What about the *back story* of Thomas? The story of Thomas and his doubting takes place in the Gospel According to John. This is a very different telling of the gospel than we have in the other three

gospels. John's Gospel was probably the last of the four to be written – not until the very late first century. It is a majestic book that many (especially scholar Elaine Pagels in her book *Beyond Belief*) now believe was written as an apologetic for a particular group within the early church. This group, called the orthodox faction, eventually became the dominate power of Christian. They emphasized the divinity of Jesus and clear-cut beliefs. They were responsible for the church's creeds such as the Apostle's creed and the Nicene creed. The Orthodox Christianity was characterized by three tenets: the right scripture, the right interpretation of that scripture, and the authority of the clergy as descendents of the original apostles to determine the right interpretation and to answer any questions.

The approach of the other prominent group in the late first century may have been represented by the Gospel of Thomas (Yes, Thomas!). Beliefs for this tended to be free flowing. They were less convinced that Jesus was God and, in fact, believed that there was a divine spark in each person. Part of the back story of Thomas is the way that apostle was treated in John's Gospel. In the story of today scripture lesson, Thomas was separated from the other disciples. He was not with them at Jesus' first appearance. He missed Jesus' blessing. He missed receiving the Holy Spirit. He also missed Jesus sending the disciples out to continue his ministry.

When the other disciples told him what he had missed, Thomas was skeptical rather than faithful. He demanded proof and demonstrated a lack of faith. Finally, when confronted with the physical resurrection, Jesus was forced to recant his attitude and ultimately to worship the divine Jesus, confessing, "My Master and My God." The orthodox views of John's Gospel were triumphant over the heresy of the Gospel of Thomas.

So, is seeing really believing? How difficult is it these days to get clear, unfettered information. What a challenge to find truth that is not being managed. In school, we are taught to be analytical. We are rewarded for skepticism in life and call it judgment. It is a great shame to be fooled, tricked, taken in, or outwitted.

I find it very hard to move from skepticism to belief and then to conversion. The challenge is to affirm good judgment and even skepticism as an honest seeking of the truth. Then don't stop there, but move through the skepticism to believe in what is possible. Give yourself to it. Trust in what is possible.

Thomas was skeptical. It's actually very impressive that, when confronted and fully convinced by truth, he was moved to faith.. I can be convinced by evidence and find it compelling intellectually, but it is very difficult for me to move all the way to faith. Jesus called Thomas and each of us to move all the way to faith, to trust, and to the commitment of our whole lives.

Let me suggest that, for most of us, the real truism is *believing is seeing*. We tend to see what we are looking for and what we are prepared to see. It really matters how we see because that will determine in large measure what we see and what we fail to see. When we fail to see injustice, we will probably not act to fight it. When we fail to notice unhealthy relationships, we will probably not work to change them. That explains the continuation of a great deal of injustice, unfair practices, and destructive relationships. We just don't see them for what they are. But Jesus calls us to see and to notice.

What are the implications of this idea that believing is seeing for us? Well, we need see what's going on in many parts of the world. We need to believe in seeing what is real – the good and the bad. *Thomas the Doubter* can teach us at this point: not to be taken in or pacified, but to insist on pursuing the truth we seek. We will only fight for justice when we see injustice. We will only challenge oppressive structures when we notice their effect on the poor and marginalized.

We need healthy skepticism, but we also need faith -- to be open to believing in the possibilities of what can happen and of what we can make happen. You and I are creators who have the capacity to make dreams come true. In many ways, “the greatest deterrent to the potential of creativity in this world [is] the failure to believe in our own uniqueness and our own powers.” (Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*).

What is possible for your life? What can you see? What will you do? Jesus calls us to see clearly and to act fearlessly (as though we are fearless) – to move through our fear all the way to faith.

What about the church? This past week, I had the opportunity to address the national meeting of the Alliance of Baptists in New Orleans about the future of the Christian Church. I was able to share with them the vision I see for the church. I see it because it is the reality I see now here at Crossroads. It is what I believe this congregation can become.

Churches can be places where people explore and seek an understanding of their faith in an atmosphere of trust and safety. Faith is a shared journey where people ask hard questions in love, share their developing understandings, and seek to integrate their actions and their beliefs. These actions include the ways we live our individual lives and the priorities we set for our communal life as a congregation. These actions include how we're able to accept the challenge of giving our best: energy, ability, creativity, and financial support to make this congregation the best it can be.

I believe that the very process of asking honest questions really matters. I have seen that asking them right out loud in church is an energizing process. People care because the questions are honest and because the questions are theirs.

I believe Jesus is still the way, the alternative way to conventional wisdom in a consumer society. I believe the Jesus way lies at the intersection of the church and the marketplace. It is as much out there as it is in here. Because I believe, I see that Jesus is not our possession to sell to the world. He is the way we know about God, the way we see God more clearly. He is the eternal God with a human face. Our calling and our challenge is to let others see Jesus in our faces. Our calling and our challenge is to be the church in this place and in our lives. It's happening now. Come believe it. Come and see it.