

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Those words form a kind of capstone to our Gospel story today, a story that weaves together the twin themes of seeing and believing. Those themes are most evident in the character of Thomas, of course; but they really weave all through the Gospel reading. In fact, they weave all through the entire twentieth chapter of John’s Gospel, the entire story of the Resurrection. The encounter between Thomas and the Risen Jesus is in fact the climactic moment of a whole series of encounters, it’s the culmination of a whole set of progressive revelations that lead up to faith in the New Life in Christ. The entire twentieth chapter of John’s Gospel is a very tightly structured, very carefully arranged set of steps leading to greater and greater degrees of seeing and believing, greater depth of experiencing and interpreting, greater unity of perceiving and witnessing. Of course, we seldom see this rising crescendo of faith, because we seldom hear the entire chapter all together. Lectionary readings on Sundays don’t usually give us the big overview. So I want to take some time this morning to step through John’s Chapter 20 and see how Thomas’s challenge to see and believe is part of the larger Resurrection story.

It all starts early in the morning on the first day of the week, when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been removed. That’s all: she doesn’t go to the tomb, she doesn’t look in the tomb, she just sees the tomb is open. She runs and tells Peter and John. So Peter and John run to the tomb, and they go inside. They see the linen wrappings that had been on Jesus’ body, but no body; and they see that the wrappings, especially the headcloth, are not just tossed around but are carefully folded up and laid aside, as if they weren’t needed anymore. Seeing that, John believes; John doesn’t yet really know what’s going on, but he’s seen something remarkable and he believes it means something significant for them all.

That’s when Mary looks in the tomb—something she hadn’t done yet—and she sees two angels. Now Mary knows that there is something divine happening, that this isn’t just the absence of an earthly body but is the presence of a heavenly reality. Turning away from the tomb then, Mary sees Jesus—but she doesn’t yet understand that it’s Jesus. It’s only when Jesus calls her by name that she recognizes him, and she calls him “Rabbouni,” “My Teacher.” But Jesus tells her not to hold on to him, and then sends her to tell the other disciples he is risen. When Mary reaches them, she says “I have seen the Lord”—not just “the Teacher” but “the Lord”—and that simple change of title indicates that Mary has seen a little more deeply into the mystery of Resurrection and believes a little more powerfully in Jesus.

Then later that same night, when the disciples are together and the doors are locked, Jesus comes and stands among them and says “Peace be with you.” The disciples rejoice when they see the Lord—seeing him alive again, they also recognize him as Lord and believe in the reality of his Resurrection Life. And because they now believe, Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit, and sends them out to do his work in the world.

All except for Thomas. Thomas, for some reason, wasn’t with them on Sunday night, and when the disciples say to Thomas what Mary had first said to them—“We have seen the Lord”—Thomas doesn’t believe them. Thomas wants to see for himself. So, a week later, when it is once again the first day of the week, the disciples are together and the doors are locked, and Jesus comes and stand among them. He says “Peace be with you”; and then he says specifically to Thomas “Look at my hands; touch my wounds; believe that it’s really me.” And Thomas says “My Lord and my God.” Thomas is the first one of them all to call Jesus “God.” Thomas is now the one who sees *most* deeply into the mystery and believes *most* powerfully in Jesus: he believes that Jesus is not just “Teacher,” not just “Lord,” but “God.” Thomas the doubter has now become Thomas the most believing of them all.

At each stage of the story there is a new revelation of Resurrection—the empty tomb, the recognition of

Jesus, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the call to believe. At each stage of the story there is a new response of faith—believing even when you don't quite know what's going on, knowing Jesus as Teacher, knowing Jesus as Lord, knowing Jesus as God. The whole of Chapter 20 builds this rising crescendo of revelation, until we finally see the Risen Jesus saying "Do not doubt but believe."

And then comes the kicker: Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Jesus says this to Thomas; but he might as well have said it to all the disciples, because all of them have *seen* something. Mary saw the open tomb and then saw Jesus standing there, and she believed; John saw the linen gravecloths empty and folded up, and he believed; the disciples saw Jesus showing his hands and side, and they believed; Thomas saw Jesus calling him directly, and he believed. *All* of them saw *something*. But now Jesus says "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Who might those unseeing believers be?

Well, in case we have any doubts, the narrator steps in to help us here. In one of those rare moments in the Gospels when the Evangelists step out of storytelling mode and speak directly to the audience, the narrator of John turns to us and writes: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." The whole point of Chapter 20, the whole point of the entire Gospel, has been to help us—you and me—come to believe in Jesus, come to have that same kind of life-transforming relationship with Jesus that Mary and Peter and John and Thomas had, so that we might have life in Jesus' name. The whole point of the rising crescendo of revelation is to break out of the narrative frame, to make the story jump out of the book and jump into our lives, to help us learn to recognize the presence of the Risen Christ, even though we don't see him face-to-face, nevertheless to recognize the presence of the Risen Christ in the New Life we encounter in our lives. The unseeing believers are us.

So how then do we see and believe? What small steps of revelation lead to a rising crescendo of faith for us? I think we can see steps to New Life where there is healing and wellness and recovery in the lives of people we care about, people we pray for—and we can believe the Risen Jesus is there. We can see steps to New Life where there is justice in a community, where barriers are being broken down, and the outcast are being welcomed in, and the forgotten are being remembered, and the poor are receiving the good things of life, and polarization of opinion is yielding to the hard work of genuine dialogue and mutual understanding, and strangers are becoming friends—and we can believe the Risen Jesus is there. We can see steps to New Life where joy is emerging out of depression, where courage is overcoming despair, where serenity and dignity are given to the dying, where people whose lives seemed overwhelmed and lost are finding a new direction and a new way—and we can believe the Risen Jesus is there. We come to believe in the Risen Jesus because we experience his New Life raising up justice and peace and compassion and love in all kinds of places, places as surprising as an empty tomb, or a spring garden, or a locked room, or a doubtful heart. We come to believe in the Risen Jesus because we experience his New Life empowering us to raise up justice and peace and compassion and love in Trinity Church, and in Staunton City, and in Augusta County, and in the Shenandoah Valley, and in our nation, and in our political life, and in our ecological stewardship, and in our economic justice, and in our whole world. We see the effects of Jesus' New Life, even if we don't see Jesus himself; and because we see, we come to believe; and through believing we have life—abundant, overflowing, joyful life—in Jesus' name.

Jesus said "Blessed are those who have not seen me, and yet have come to believe." We are blessed in our believing when we witness the power of Jesus' Resurrection Life all around us. We are called in our believing to share that blessing with everyone we can reach. That is our Easter mission. That is our Easter joy. Amen.