

SEEING ISN'T BELIEVING

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 16
John 20:19-31

When I was a boy of nine or ten, I was given my first Bible, a thick story Bible, without too many pictures, which I read all the way through for myself, in between Superman and Batman comics. I was especially taken with the accounts of God's visiting people here on earth—in dreams and burning bushes and angelic visions and the like—and I remember how much I longed for a visit myself. At first, I thought in terms of hearing a heavenly voice, from the clouds, but by the time I'd read through the gospels, I was hoping for a personal visit from Jesus, so that I could, like Peter and John and Mary Magdalene, report that "I have seen the Lord." I was sure it was possible, and would be given to me, in a miracle, any day now.

As it worked out, the grounds of faith were not to be, for me, voices from on high or Jesus in the flesh. Like many of you, I suspect, my experience has been more like this described in the First Letter of Peter: "Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy."¹

The early Church accommodated very slowly, as I did, to the reality that Jesus was not to going to make another cameo appearance for us. He was seen here and there for a month or so—for forty days Luke said—and then he was gone, no longer visible. By the time John wrote his gospel, near the end of the first century, most of the people around him—like us—had never seen or heard Jesus in the flesh. Most of them had been born after he died, so all they had were the stories, passed down from their parents and grandparents. John's problem, which is a continuing problem for the church, was how to encourage people in the faith when Jesus was no longer around to be seen or touched. The story of Thomas gave him a way to do that. By detailing that reluctant disciple's doubt, John took the words right out of our mouths and put them in Thomas' instead, so that each of us has the opportunity to think about how we do—or do not—come to believe.²

Poor Thomas, of course, has been known as "Doubting Thomas" and received much negative attention over the centuries, as though doubt were a bad thing for a follower of Jesus Christ. Yet doubt about the resurrection is a feature of all the Easter stories. The first appearances of the risen Christ were resisted as idle talk, and those who hadn't actually seen Jesus for themselves refused point blank to accept the stories. Thomas is a case in point, but hardly unique. He wasn't there with the other disciples behind the locked doors that first Easter evening when the risen Lord stood among them

¹ 1 Peter 1:8.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), 113-118.

and gave them his peace and the Holy Spirit. It's not clear where Thomas was, but when he returns the others tell him: "We have seen the Lord"—the same words Mary Magdalene had used when she returned from her meeting Jesus in the garden on Easter morning. Thomas is no more ready to accept their witness than they had been to accept Mary's. "Unless I see...I will not believe," he announces, which makes Thomas a stand-in for all of us who want to see something for ourselves before we decide whether or not it is true.

It is an understandable attitude. John understood it. Why else would he have told us about Thomas? Even Jesus understood it. He didn't dismiss Thomas from the circle of his friends for failing to trust what the others had told him. On the contrary, Jesus made sure Thomas was included in that circle by coming back and repeating the whole scene a second time for his benefit alone. He even invited Thomas to carry out the tests of touch that he himself had specified, to put his fingers into the nail prints and his hand into the wounded side.

Thomas, it turns out, is not such a skeptic after all. At the sight of Jesus all his doubts vanish and he does not even need, it seems, to apply any of his tests. Thomas makes a confession of faith as strong as any in the gospel: "My Lord and my God!" Arguably, it's the only place in the New Testament where Christ is identified as God. So, in the end, no one who was there that night had to take anyone's word for anything. They all saw for themselves and believed.

But what about us? What about all of us who were not there, who will never lay eyes or hands on the concrete person of Jesus Christ? We are outside the circle of this story by thousands of years and yet Jesus means to include us in it too. Speaking over Thomas' shoulder to the rest of us, he says, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That's a blessing that can particularly difficult for modern men and women to claim. We're used to scientific ways of thinking and visual forms of communication. We're skeptical of appeals to take things on faith, to believe what we can't see. It's easy for empiricists to characterize religious believers as a self-deceived, credulous lot who allow themselves to be persuaded by the flimsiest evidence, so long as it serves to strengthen their convictions and confirm their prejudices. And some belief is like that—not only credulous, but superstitious. Some religious hope is little better than wishful thinking, and some faith is almost indistinguishable from magic.

But those who believe only what they see go too far the other way, for believing is much more than seeing. That's true even for science. Albert Einstein used to say that the work of the scientist begins, not in anything that he can see, but in a certain attitude. It begins in a sense of wonder. He warns us that without a sense of wonder we might as well be dead, for it is the beginning of all true art and science. The great preacher Maurice Boyd put it this way: "astronomy did not begin when an astronomer looked at the night sky through a telescope; it began when a little child said:

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!”³

And the same thing is true of artists and all who create. For writers, composers, painters, sculptors, dancers alike, their hope is to bring into being something that was not there before. No one will ever see it, read it, sing it, hear it, or play it until they make it. That is what it means to create. In this sense, the artist’s work is done by faith, not by sight; and that faith is the very condition of creativity.

In some ways, belief is like falling in love. It’s a road you take before you really know where it’s going. You do it before you have all the facts. You don’t set off on this road because you understand everything about the One you follow. You set off because there is something compelling about the beloved that you cannot yet organize intellectually. You set off because you’re captured by some deep intuition. In other words, love, like faith, is first a matter of the heart. Can you trust it? William James considered the question, and said that lovers are closer to the truth of things because love, faith, trust and generosity reveal what cynicism, suspicion, hatred and fear never discover.

I often tell those new to the faith that much if not most of what you can perceive about God can be encountered only in the very act of following God. The deepest understanding of things spiritual is hidden from the eyes of those who do not risk the spiritual road. The road itself is the teacher. You try faith on like you put on a new pair of glasses, not knowing what you might see until you put them on. Then you move through the world wearing lenses that make everything appear sharp and fresh but strange and differently shaped. You risk the new perspective of faith, you dare to look at life, watch the flow of the days, and read scripture through these new and disorienting lenses of faith. You pray when you are still unsure of prayer. You may worship, even though you have only the most tenuous spiritual grasp of the One you praise.

Once you have taken the heart-led leap, once you trust and follow that subjective, divine intuition, then the shapelessness of intuition comes to be carved into a shape by concrete words and grounded concepts. This is where theology and Bible study come in, the reading of books, the saying of creeds and catechisms—the belief about. These are words, concepts, and ancient images of God tested by time and Spirit that give shape and substance to the vagaries of intuition. This is the tradition passed down to us from Doubting Thomas and Peter the Rock and John the Evangelist and all the other fathers and mothers of the church. Trust moves a step at a time deeper into understanding. “Slowly heart and head take hand; trust and belief kiss.”⁴

Anselm, the great medieval theologian, coined a venerable three-word Latin motto that still echoes around theology: *fides quarens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding.” His point was that, most often, faith leads to understanding, and not the other way around. There may be much you doubt as you sit in church and dread the moment we rise to say the creed. You glance to your right and to your left, looking to see

³ R Maurice Boyd, *Running to Paradise* (Burlington, Ontario: Welch Publishing Company, 1990), 68-76.

⁴ Michael L. Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 17.

if your neighbors in the pew will speak the words easily or awkwardly. Perhaps when the time comes, they can say it and believe it for you, at least for now. Or maybe there is a word in the creed that you can believe that the old man in front of you cannot wrap his head around today. But together—as a community—we believe.

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” With these words, Jesus assures us that an Easter faith is available to all of us, all of us who have not seen—to all people in all times and places no matter how remote from that ragged band in Jerusalem so many centuries ago. Just as the risen Christ came back and transformed doubting Thomas from skeptic to believer, so Christ can change us. We can be new. We can start over. We can have life, and life abundant, by the power of the Holy Spirit he has breathed on us all. The gospel narrative itself, which the Spirit enlivens again in our reading and preaching and teaching, gives us all we need to believe without having seen.

The road is before us. We have faith to give, and He is worthy to receive it. What is there left for us to do but give it to Him? Let’s give it, then! Just a tiny little bit, small as a mustard seed, will do. Give Him that, and you will be astonished at what He will do with it, and where it will lead you, and what it will show you.

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.