

FAIRMOUNT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
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REV. RICHARD D. CLEWELL
SERMON: "SEEING IS BELIEVING"
SCRIPTURE TEXT: John 20: 19 – 31

A while back, I sat in the intensive care unit waiting room with a mother whose pre-teen daughter had just died after a two year struggle with bone cancer. She was a Christian and I had prayed with her and her daughter on several occasions. "I don't understand it, why?" she sobbed. "I wish I could believe that God cares or there is even a God. But I am not sure at all." More recently, a good friend of mine expressed her dismay and confusion about the tsunami that destroyed so many lives in Southeast Asia. "Why would God do this to innocent people? Where is God in all of this?" A confirmand raises his doubts, "I can't believe there is such a thing as resurrection!"

These persons have expressed the feelings of many today. We live in a world where many try to cling, disguise or hide their doubts and religious uncertainties. Often times our doubts are seen as a weakness in faith or even as sin. There are those who think faith to be a cock-sure, slam-dunk status where "you say what you believe and believe what you say" without questions or wavering. My own experience in life has been just the opposite. When I graduated from seminary I was sure I knew all the answers; as I work with people in their life journeys and struggles as well as in my own pilgrim path, I have found that I didn't even know what the important questions were and I myself had and continue to have questions and doubts about my perceptions and assumptions about God and the life of transformation revealed in Jesus Christ. I have come to appreciate that questioning and doubt are important factors in the development of faith and the process of heart and life change.

Perhaps we come to this very familiar Gospel text today with a set of assumptions about the characters involved. A number of Christ's core group of followers, including most of the disciples, is seemingly transformed by his post-resurrection appearance from hidden fear-filled survivors to rejoicing and passionate proponents for the Master. One, who was absent for some legitimate reason, one week later in wanting confirmation gets labeled through the centuries as "Doubting Thomas" in a very pejorative way. Perhaps our assumptions need to be challenged a bit and maybe we can learn something about our faith in this man Thomas.

I invite you to follow along as I read this text (John 20:19-31). Here we see this first faith community behind locked doors in fear of the religious authorities; after all they could be next. This was the church's problem in the day that John wrote this Gospel a half century later – their story and experience is reflected in the events happening to these first disciples. Jesus, suddenly standing among them, declares, "Peace be with you!" which is more than just a common greeting and stands as

affirmation that God's reconciliation through the cross and resurrection brings assured peace and hope in the midst of fear and chaos. In John's account he shows them his hands and his side that verified who he was, confirmed Mary's morning report, and brought them immediate joy.

In the second peace blessing he commissions the faith community to continue the work that God sent him to do and bestows on them the indwelling Spirit to empower their transforming life and mission. For them as a faith community and for all joining this growing body of believers, the forgiveness of sins is the Spirit – empowered mission of continuing Jesus' work in the world. In John, sin is not a moral or behavioral transgression but it is to be blind to the revelation of God in Jesus. And so, for them and us, the commission is to make God in Jesus known to the world. When the Church celebrates Easter, it also celebrates the beginnings of its mission empowered by the Spirit. By loving one another as Jesus loves, the faith community reveals God to the world. By revealing God to the world, the body of faith makes it possible for the world to choose to enter relationship with this God of limitless love. It is in choosing or rejecting this relationship with God that the sin of blindness is forgiven or retained and that "seeing" is believing.

Therefore, our mission as theirs, is not to be the arbiter of right and wrong, but rather to bear unceasing witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus lives, not because he can walk through locked doors and show his wounds to frightened disciples, but because he breathes new life into those disciples through the gift of the Spirit and commissions them (and us) to continue his work.

Then we come to the best part of this account. Thomas wasn't with them and when they tell him they have seen the Lord, he demands proof to believe. Their announcement to him echoes Mary Magdalene's report to them earlier that morning. Frankly, the disciples did not seem to believe Mary and probably were not convinced. They still weren't certain until his appearance before them. In rejecting verbal witness to the resurrection, Thomas is no different than the others. He wants exactly what Jesus gave the others; he wants to receive what he missed. He wants the truth – not a faith of smoke and mirrors. Why should he take their word? Author Suzanne Guthrie expresses the following: "This moment imagine what Thomas might be thinking when Simon Peter declares, "We have seen the Lord!"

You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon let's-build-three-booths Peter? You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon God-forbid-Lord-this-shall-even-happen-to you Peter?

You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon you-shall-never-wash-my-feet-not-my feet-only-but-also-my-hands-and-my-head Peter?

You have seen the Lord, Mr. Simon I'll-never-deny-thee-deny-thee-deny-thee Peter?"

Perhaps Thomas' caution makes him a more credible witness and give him credit- he wanted to know. And when Jesus comes offering his peace the next week, Jesus does not condemn Thomas for his doubts but repeats to him almost the very words of his call for proof. There is not evidence that Thomas actually touched Jesus. Rather he sees with his whole heart and being and responds with the boldest confession of faith in the New Testament – “My Lord and My God.” Jesus' words (v.27) are best translated “do not be unbelieving but believing.” Jesus directs Thomas to move from a position of unbelief to belief; from blindness to seeing with his whole heart. This story does not focus on doubt and skepticism but on the process of faith. Jesus meets Thomas where he is and in the encounter he sees God fully revealed in Jesus and is transformed and initiated on his faith journey. That is always the way that Jesus meets us again and again – where we are in our journeys when we are weak or strong, questioning or strongly committed. Our faith is not based on our senses but rests on our inward perception of our living Lord. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, notes, “In a comprehensive sense, the opening of the heart is the purpose of spirituality, both our collective and individual practices. The Christian life is about “the hatching of the heart,” the opening of the self to the Spirit of God by spending time in “thin places” – those places and practices through which we become open to and nourished by the One in whom we live and move and have our being.”

The beatitude that follows in verse 29 is not meant to put down Thomas in anyway as a doubter. Rather, Jesus encourages those in the future who are not first century eye-witnesses to discover the truth alone in prayer, together in community, in struggles for justice, in serving the weak and the poor, and worshipping together in the Spirit. Kathy Galloway in her book, *Lent and Easter Readings from Iona*, declares, “The place of the gospel is never abstract or academic, nor is it theoretical or dogmatic. It is the place where the word becomes flesh, when you can see the marks in the side.”

I am indeed thankful for Thomas. He is so much like me and you. His story is one of grace, hope and promise, not judgment or reprimand. Both Thomas' and our new life faith is more important to Jesus than the grounds of that faith. He gives Thomas a sign and asks him to see and believe. Jesus' love for him, the others, and us did not end with his death, but determines all future interactions between Christ and his community of followers. The revelation of God in Jesus is ever present, ever new, and ever available because of the work of his Spirit. Thomas believed and shared his faith and Christ's love in Asia Minor and reportedly as far as India. Those to whom John wrote this gospel under persecution for their new expression of faith in Christ believed and were known as Christians for the love they displayed to all. We too in our faith are called in all circumstances to walk with the presence of Christ as his demonstrators of God's love. As Thomas' “seeing” was heartfelt and transforming; may our faith live and love in certain and uncertain times upheld by the Spirit and under-girded by this company of

believers and witnesses. May our prayer be mirrored in the words of Dag Hammarskjöld, late Secretary General of the United Nations, who wrote: “Give me a pure heart – that I may see thee, a humble heart – that I may hear thee, a heart of love – that I may serve thee, a heart of faith – that I may abide in thee.” Such “seeing” is believing.

Amen

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