

The Conviction of Things Not Seen
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John 20:19-20; 24-29
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“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. . . But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him. ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe’. A week later his disciples were again in the house and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Thomas H. Kroeger captured the essence of this scene in a poem he wrote in 1984. It reads in part:

*These things did Thomas count as real:
the warmth of blood, the chill of steel,
The grain of wood, the heft of stone,
the last frail twitch of flesh and bone.*

*The vision of his skeptic mind
was keen enough to make him blind
to any unexpected act
too large for his small world of fact.*

*His reasoned certainties denied
that one could live when one had died,
Until his fingers read like braille
the markings of the spear and nail.*

Thomas was an early version of “the man from Missouri”. It took a bit of convincing, but in the end, Thomas finally came around to believing that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. As a matter of fact, a great number of preachers have since then pointed out that, in spite of his initial doubt, Thomas was one of the first of the disciples to see Jesus for who he really was when he confessed him as “My Lord, and my God”. Others have lifted up the clarifying role that doubt can play in a person’s search for truth and have therefore credited Thomas’s for being a true seeker. Both of these views are probably valid

interpretations and deserve careful consideration, but I believe they both miss the main point of the story.

Almost hidden away, so as to be easily overlooked, is a single sentence that appears at the very end of this story in which Jesus says to Thomas, and through him to all generations yet to come, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29b).

So, if you leave here today and can’t remember anything else I’ve said, I hope you’ll remember that sentence, because the point of this story is not about Thomas, after all. Instead, it’s about you and me, and to truly *see*, it will require that we look beyond the literal interpretation of the text to the deeper meaning behind it.

John wrote his Gospel some seventy years after Jesus’ life on earth was ended—after everyone who had known him was pretty much dead and gone. It’s unique to John, appearing nowhere else in the New Testament, thus leading many to believe that it may not have been part of the oral tradition out of which the written Gospels emerged and that it is therefore more likely to be a product of John’s own literary imagination than the reporting of an actual event. If that is true, then we should ask why John would include such a story in his Gospel? We needn’t go very far to find a possible answer to that since John tells us in the very next verse that this story, along with others, have been 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” (20: 31).

It could be, then, that those closing words to Thomas were simply John’s way of reassuring all those who at the end of the first century were being asked to believe without benefit of ever seeing or touching the risen Jesus. To come to faith, they would have to have the kind of eyes and ears that were able to perceive the reality of the resurrection without appealing to physical appearances. Hence, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

It is the same challenge that you and I face today, two thousand years later. Like those in John’s time, we, too, are being invited to believe in the resurrected Jesus on this Sunday following Easter without benefit of seeing and touching him, because, as far as I know, he has not made any recent appearances by walking through closed doors and inviting folks like us to see and touch him to make sure that he’s real. Seeing and touching is good, mind you, I’m not opposed to that at all! But according to John’s Gospel, there is a higher way and that is to believe without seeing. After all, that’s what faith is—it’s what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews refers to as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb. 11:1).

It’s the kind of faith that can dispense with tangible proofs and visible evidence that believes heroically even when there is no obvious and immediate confirmation. All the saints of old are certain that the most heroic of believers are not those who are swept on happily and without effort by a gale of the Spirit blowing in their sails, but they, who like

Jesus on the cross, can believe on undauntedly through the dark night of the soul, even when all seems lost.

The proof of the resurrection for most of us today is not in a Thomas-like confirmation of a once-dead and then-enlivened body. Instead, it is found in the perceived reality of his continuing power and presence in the church that bears his name. For that, after all, is what *resurrection* means. It has little to do with a resuscitated corpse and everything to do with living a radically transformed life in the present. And we become embodiments of the risen Christ every time our lives become the open expressions of his continued presence and power in our world. But none of that just happens by itself; we also have to work at it and be willing to die to some things in order to become something new in Christ.

Since early January, many of us have been engaged in a series of *sacred conversations* as part of our Wednesday Night Connections program. It began as a conversation on race and has since focused in on immigration as a piece of a larger tapestry on race. It is a journey that has taken us deep inside ourselves where we've had to contend with our own stereotypes, hidden biases, and overt prejudices regarding these issues. In the process, we have been reminded that race is a social construct that serves no other purpose than to separate people into different groupings; that our nation was founded by white people who nearly exterminated one race in order to build the American dream on the enslaved and bloodied backs of yet another race.

Together, we have faced the awful truth that most of us who are white never think of ourselves as a race; that it is only to those of color (and who are therefore *different* from us) to whom we ascribe that distinction. We have struggled with the realization that most of us live unconsciously with the *white privilege* that our skin color gives us without really considering the effect of that on those persons whose skin color does not afford them the same privileges. We have grappled with the horrible reality that the nearly five thousand black men, women and children who have been lynched by racist mobs in this country were crucified on the same shameful tree upon which Jesus hung and died and that God's heart broke not once but five thousand times five thousand at the sight of it.

Having looked in the mirror and having seen the faces of our sisters and brothers of color and different ethnicities looking back at us, many of us have chosen to become an active part of the solution rather than to remain part as of the problem. In a spiritual sense, we chose to die to some of our old ways of thinking and acting about race and immigration in order to more consciously live into a new way of thinking and being in Christ.

We've also come to believe that every other conversation that takes place in this church is also a *sacred* conversation because we are a church that knows itself to be called by God to love our neighbors as ourselves and not to condone apathy or indifference in the face of human suffering. Instead, we are a church that sees that suffering and asks "why?" And then, with God's help, gets up and finds a way to do something about it. We engage in sacred conversations in order to find sacred solutions, because we know that that is what we need to be about as followers of his way.

That's why we will continue these conversations into the foreseeable future. Jesus taught that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, but one of the troubling questions being debated today remains that of *who is my neighbor?* Our Statue of Liberty declares that it is "the poor and huddled masses yearning to be free." Scripture tells us it is "the stranger at our gate". Our faith invites us to enter into the truth of that reality.

So step aside, Thomas, with your insistence on seeing the physical evidence before you will believe. Make way for those who believe without seeing—pointing instead to the Easter reality that transcends the cross and the tomb and is revealed in the life and work of those who follow in his name. For Christ is risen, he is risen indeed! And the cross that hangs empty before us is the only visible sign we need. We are an Easter people, and before the empty cross of Jesus we take our stand, committed to a life in his name and according to his way. "For blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." May it ever be so!

Amen.