

First Presbyterian Church
John 20:19-31, “Seeing is Believing”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/23/2017

Through the remainder of April, May, and June,
I’m going to be using the lectionary texts as the basis for my sermons.
There is a thread that hops around the Gospel of John,
and I’ll stick with that while it lasts.
Later on we might spend some time in a series of Genesis passages
that come up in June.

On Easter Sunday we looked at the first half of John 20
– a wonderfully described interaction between Mary Magdalene
and Jesus on the day of his resurrection.

Today the show-and-tell continues with the rest of Jesus’ disciples.

SLIDE 1

“Seeing is believing.”
This piece of wisdom is familiar to all of us,
and its place in the pantheon of proverbs is well-earned.

It’s easy to assert something to be true,
to brag about your ability or status,
but be bluffing all along.

Where’s your proof?
The proof, and thus the belief, comes in seeing.

SLIDE 2

Surely in the ancient world stories of the Egyptian pyramids
spread around the globe.
But who could believe that such structures were possible?

They would have to be seen to be believed.

Visual proof – either in person, from an eye witness,
or through photographic evidence has remained the standard
for belief through the 20th century and even into our own day.

SLIDE 3

I mean, who would believe this parking spot was possible if you hadn't seen it?

But we are not 20th century people. We live in the digital age.

Today, we are constantly reminded that seeing
in and of itself may be of little value for belief.

SLIDE 4

The artist Scott Mutter has made a name for himself by fusing together images
in a way that make you question what you see,
and therefore what you believe.

He calls his images, "Surrational."

SLIDE 5

This image brings together a sanctuary with a man's face
in a way that's very hard to believe, but also quite unsettling.
Not being sure if we can believe what we see is disturbing.

So if someone told you, "I know the *real* way the Egyptian pyramids were built:
by ALIENS!" You might say, "Where's your proof?"

If your friend were to show you *this* image:

SLIDE 6

I doubt many of you would find it a convincing proof.

And so, "Seeing is believing" has fallen on hard times.

Nevertheless, we find it quite in fashion in the Gospel of John.

BACK TO BASIC SERMON SLIDE

Richard Dietrich says,

"It's difficult to overestimate the importance of *seeing* in John's Gospel."

The first chapter describes Jesus as, "the Word," that was there in the beginning,
and "the light." Verse five says,

"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness

has not overcome it," and in verse 14, John says,

"we have *seen* his glory – the glory of the one and only Son,

who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Additionally, the miracles that take place in the gospel of John are consistently referred to as “signs.”

So after healing a royal official’s son, we learn in 4:54,
**“This was the second sign Jesus performed
after coming from Judea to Galilee.”**

In 6:1, **“a great crowd of people followed him
because they saw the signs he had performed.”**

And in 6:30, the people ask Jesus,
“What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you?”

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is the light that enables people to see the signs pointing out of the kingdom of darkness and toward the kingdom of heaven.
In this sense, seeing really is believing.

So we catch a bit more depth in the phrase used by Mary after she recognized Jesus was not merely the gardener, ran from the tomb and told the disciples, “I have *seen* the Lord!”

This background also helps us understand the second half of John 20. After-all, if there is anything people would want to see in order to believe, it’s resurrection from the dead.

The setting for our passage is the evening of the first day of the week. That would be, Sunday night in the raw mix of hope, excitement, wonder, confusion, and delirium following reports that Jesus was alive.

We get an interesting detail on the mentality of the disciples in v. 19: the doors were locked for fear of the Jewish leaders.

Jesus had been crucified just days earlier, and if the shepherd has been struck down, the disciples know the next logical move would be to corral the scattered sheep.

Whatever the mix of reactions they had to the news of an empty tomb,

there was still a healthy dose of fear guiding their decision making.

Just then, right in the middle of their locked-up safe-house, John says,

“Jesus came and stood among them.”

Resurrection Jesus isn't messing around!

Like he had been hiding behind a curtain the whole time,

Jesus is suddenly, without warning or flashes of lighting,
right there in the room with them.

“Peace be with you!” he says.

Then Jesus *shows* the disciples his hands and side,

and “the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

Seeing is believing.

Once again Jesus says, “Peace be with you,”

and then he delivers an abbreviated version of the great commission
that is much more well-known from Matthew 28.

“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”

As the God the Father sent Jesus, the Word made flesh,

to be a light in the darkness, so Jesus sends the disciples

(and thus the church). There is, then a direct connection

being made here between Jesus' death and resurrection,

and the mission of the community that follows him.

Because Jesus has risen, the disciples have seen and believed.

As a result, they are joined in the expansive, radical-love,

light-in-the-darkness purpose that Jesus had.

But wait a minute? How can they be expected to go from weak-faith

deserters of Jesus at the cross to bold, God-sent missionaries?

The next verse reveals that Jesus breathes on them – which is odd

and maybe a bit disturbing if you think about what that would mean

if you were to try it at a gathering in your own home.

But this word “breath” is used in both Hebrew and Greek to also mean “spirit.”

With this breath-gift, the Holy Spirit is imparted to the disciples.
This means they inherit not only the deep purpose of Jesus,
but also the God-with-us empowerment of Spirit filling.

The next verses, 24 – 29, share a very similar encounter in a
very similar situation with a very similar pattern of events:
Disciples, locked door, Jesus appears, “Peace be with you”
– all this is the same as in vv. 19-23.

But we learn that one disciple, Thomas, was missing in the original seeing
of Jesus with his resurrected body.
All the other disciples were shown his hands and side, but not Thomas.

So he was holding off in his belief until
**“I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were,
and put my hand into his side.”** (v. 25)

So a week later, Thomas gets his chance.
Jesus appears, greets the disciples, and says to Thomas,
**“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand
and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”**

Stop doubting.

Of course this is why we know Thomas as “Doubting Thomas.”
Shame, shame, Thomas, why couldn’t you just believe?

But is that the real take-away from this exchange?

Is the reason John puts near duplicate resurrection appearances
one after the other to make Thomas look less faithful than the others?

After all, Thomas wasn’t asking for any more proof of resurrection
than the other disciples had already received.

I hear something else in this exchange, and it is revealed in verse 29.

Jesus responds to Thomas saying,

“Because you have seen me, you have believed.”

(Once again, the theme I’ve highlighted all along – seeing is believing.)

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Seeing is believing, but better still is *not seeing* and believing.

Wow! A total reversal of course! Why?

The story is included not because Thomas is a shameful doubter,
but because John knows that the rest of the church
is put in a very difficult spot: If seeing is believing,
then how am I supposed to believe after Jesus
has stopped making these appearances?

The church that follows the eye witnesses must believe
based on the seeing and believing of those who came before them.
And blessed are those who do so.

Many scholars argue that chapter 20 is the original ending of John’s gospel.
It closes with a purpose statement for all that has come before it,
explicitly naming the very group of people
who would need to trust the eye witness accounts of others.

**“Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples,
which are not recorded in this book. But these are written
that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,
and that by believing you may have life in his name.”**

The entire book of John, then, is an attempt to provide an alternative
means of seeing, so that whoever reads
the accounts of those who have seen may believe.

I noted earlier that we live in a seeing is not necessarily believing world.

As another example of this, Facebook announced last week
that they will be pressing their vision of “Augmented Reality”
on their users in the coming months and years.

This is where “reality” is not enough – you must augment it
with a digital overlay so that we use our phone cameras
to see what we would normally look at with our eyes
and find hidden notes, information, interactive art,
and (of course) purchasing opportunities.

For Facebook, not only is seeing not believing,
seeing...*is not even seeing*, unless you’re using a camera
connected to a Facebook account!

The challenge of living in light of the resurrection has, perhaps,
never been greater than it is in our own day.
We are ruled by oligarchs, we are told to accept alternative truths,
we are obsessed with consumption,
and our desires are shaped by the media
we obsessively consume.

In such a world, John’s thesis that seeing is believing sounds,
at best, quaint and old-fashioned.

But Jesus didn’t stop there.

**“Because you have seen me, you have believed.
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”**

Is it a call to blind faith? Faith that has no connection to visual evidence?

Some might say so. But I see it as an invitation to understand
through the eyes of faith, looking beyond surface level realities.

After all, in our own day, seeing hardly counts as a foundation for belief, anyway.

The Shroud of Turin has been considered visual evidence of the resurrection
by some, but dismissed by others as a cleverly disguised fake.

Let’s just say that it’s real. Let’s just say that the face and wounds seen
in that ancient cloth really are those of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

Would that be enough to cut through the cynicism and doubt of our age?

I think not.

In the end, despite all the obstacles between seeing and believing in our own day,
we end up in very much the same place as the first readers of John's Gospel.

If we believe, it must be on the basis of others who have seen.

Yes, the first women and men who saw the risen Jesus.

But also the sight of millions of others who, over the centuries,
have seen the truth of the resurrection in their own lives.

Friends, seeing is believing.

Those of us who arrive late in the game must see with the eyes of faith.

We have seen the truth of the resurrection when the sick are healed,

when enemies are reconciled,

when deep wounds are forgiven,

when the dehumanized are given honor and worth,

when grace triumphs over pride and self-sufficiency,

when the Kingdom of God breaks in around us.