

First Presbyterian Church
John 20:19-31, "Seeing is Believing"
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/12/2026

"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 for someone 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 from what you see with your own two eyes.

Well, it just so happens I've had some moments this year
that you'd have to see to believe.
Nobody knows this, because I had to keep it completely secret,
but a few months ago, I was invited by the United Nations
to be part of a peacekeeping operation in the Gaza Strip.
Oh, don't believe me? Well here's your proof:

SLIDE



Yep, that's me, in my official United Nations gear,
helping that child who has ... an inscrutable toy of some kind.
It was an opportunity I'll never forget,
and yet which in some ways I hardly remember.

But that wasn't all. You might have heard about NASA's Artemis 2 mission
to go around the moon. Honestly, I didn't want to make a big deal about it,
but if you thought one of those astronauts looked familiar,
it's because I was able to use some continuing education funds
to join the Artemis 2 crew going around the moon.

What, you don't believe me? Fortunately, I've got a picture of that, too:

SLIDE



Yep, that's me on the left with my fellow Artemis 2 astronauts.
Ready for all our ... space activities. (They say space adds 10 lbs...)

So, I just got back from the Artemis mission on Thursday,
and the schedule was a little cramped, but I was still able to squeeze in
a little golf this weekend.

One of my favorite tournaments to play in is a cozy gathering
down in Augusta, Georgia called "The Masters."

And, believe it or not, I'm gonna win.

Yep. Right after today's worship service I'll finish up my final round and ...
okay, here's the picture: SLIDE



Hey – I'm even wearing the same clothes!
Seeing is believing ... right?

Of course, these are all AI created images. And AI is a big reason why
"Seeing is believing" has fallen on hard times.
Whenever we see an unbelievable picture, our first instinct is ...
to not believe it.

BACK TO BASIC SERMON SLIDE

What about the resurrection of Jesus?

Do you need to see it to believe it? And (this is the more important question)
if you *did* see Jesus resurrection,
would that be enough to overcome your doubt?

In defense of “You have to see it to believe it”

I have noted the importance of light / dark,
seeing / not seeing in John’s gospel
a number of times the past few weeks.

Jesus is the light that enables people
to see the signs of God’s love pointing toward the kingdom of heaven.

If you remember from last week,
when Mary first arrived at the empty tomb, it was ...still dark.
She was scared and ran away.

But by the time she returned to the disciples with the news
“I have seen the Lord,” the morning sun had risen.
The light of the world has shown upon her
and she was able to believe and share the good news.

All of this sets up the second half of John 20.

As the disciples were meeting in a locked-up safe-house,
still fearful of the same people who had crucified Jesus,
“Jesus came and stood among them.”

It happened suddenly, without warning or flashes of lighting,
Jesus *materialized* right there in the room with them.
Resurrection Jesus isn’t messing around!

Then Jesus *showed* the disciples his hands and side,
and **“the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”**
Did you catch that? “When they *saw* the Lord.”
Maybe seeing is believing?

And Jesus said to the disciples, **“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”**
This is a very important line that I will come back to later on.
For now, just ponder what Jesus says when he first appears to them:

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

It was an amazing moment of validation for the disciples.

There was just one problem: Thomas wasn't there.

Thomas heard all the stories from the others. But that wasn't enough for him.

He said “I won't believe Jesus has risen again
unless he can physically put my finger into his wounds.”

And one week later, when the disciples were once again
meeting in a locked-up safe-house,

Jesus again stood among them, and announced,

“Peace be with you!”

(This is what we remember when we pass the peace of Christ, by the way.)

This time Jesus 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? I hear something else.

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

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 does Jesus say this?

The story of Doubting Thomas is *not* to shame Thomas for being doubtful.

Rather, it is told precisely because the rest of the church of Jesus Christ
share's Thomas' experience of being left out.

If seeing is believing, then how is anyone supposed to believe after Jesus has stopped making these post-resurrection appearances?

Let's return now to words of Jesus when he first appeared to the disciples:
"As the Father has sent me, so I send 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.

In his book *Surprised by Hope*, Bible scholar NT Wright discusses
the unique characteristics of early Christian hope in the resurrection:
**"Because the early Christians believed that resurrection had begun
with Jesus and would be completed in the great final resurrection on
the last day, they believed that God had called them to work with him,
in the power of the Spirit, to implement the achievement of Jesus and
thereby to anticipate the final resurrection."**

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.

Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit, by breathing upon them,
giving them the breath of life, the wind of God.
This means they inherit not only the deep purpose of Jesus,
but also the God-with-us empowerment of Spirit filling.

And if Jesus sent them in this way,
Jesus also sends us to be messengers of the resurrection.
*But how can we do that if seeing is believing
and we haven't seen the resurrected Jesus?*

Because of two realities:

1) Followers of Jesus in our own time stand as evidence
of an unbroken line of faith going all the way back
to those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus resurrection.

Those whom Jesus sent out in the power of the Spirit are,
by anticipating of the final resurrection, generation after generation,
evidence of Jesus own resurrection.

2) Jesus anticipated this being the case in his final words to Thomas.

“Because you have seen me, you have believed.

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

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

The final verse of this chapter is 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:
people like me and you:

John 20:31

**“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 Gospel 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.

Is it true that seeing is believing? If it ever was true, I’m not sure it is anymore.
The challenge of living in light of the resurrection has, perhaps,
never been greater than it is in our own day.

But Jesus knew it was going to be like this.

Jesus blessed the billions of people who had not seen and yet believed.

And, let us think of all that we *do* see.

Think of all we see from those who have been sent by Jesus
as Jesus was sent by the Father.

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.