Believing is Seeing

1 Peter 1: 3-9, John 20: 19-31

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Thomas is one of my favorite biblical characters. I have great empathy for Thomas: “Unless I see . . . I will not believe.” I’m a realist. I believe things I can see. How about you? I love ideas, abstractions, theories, but I’m more often convinced by what I see, by what works, by actual behaviors. How about you? Do you trust what people say or what they do—actions speak louder than words? I appreciate the preaching advice of an early church father: “When you have to, use words.” I’d rather see a sermon than hear one. How about you? What works for you? Is the proof in the pudding? I have great affinity with Thomas, “Unless I see . . . I will not believe.”

That’s the world we live in . . . “Don’t tell me, show me.” We look before we leap. It’s good practice—smart in life; smart in business—due diligence. Last Tuesday the Session considered some property improvements: a bathroom needed repairs; a back porch; a section of the floor where some of you are sitting—don’t worry, it shouldn’t collapse—not soon anyway! Being the stewards they are, your elders asked questions: Are the proposed fixes the best solutions? Were multiple bids solicited? What repairs are needed now, which can wait? Where will the money come from? When making decisions, those are the kinds of questions we expect—due diligence—Request for Performance; outcome. We look before we leap. It’s wise, it’s prudent, and sometimes life saving—Stranger Danger. We teach that to our children—Stranger Danger—or we do now.

I can’t believe it; well, I can and I can’t; but fifty plus years ago, my parents put me on a Greyhound and sent me off by myself to visit my cousins five hours away. The only advice my father gave me was—“When the bus stops, don’t go in the Men’s Room by yourself; and when you do, don’t speak to anyone.” I was clueless, but took his advice and arrived without incident. I wouldn’t advise any parent to do that today—but that was a long time ago—not today. Times are different. No parent in their right mind would take their nine year old to the terminal and send them away alone on a five-hour bus trip, even if it was to their cousins—wouldn’t happen, not in a million years—Stranger Danger. That’s the world we’re living in. Who are you going to trust?

They say 911 changed everything. And it did, but distrust was around long before 911 and it’s only getting worse. I’m not worried about putting my grandkids on a bus—wouldn’t even consider it; I’m more worried about that little hand-held device connected to the internet, the one children take with them wherever they go. I’m more worried about cell phones, laptops and tablets; or more precisely, I’m more worried about Dangerous Strangers who use the Internet to twist Truth. I suppose you could argue that twisted truth has been with us for as long as we’ve been on earth. The first story in the Bible warns about the consequences of twisted truth. We have always twisted truth whether in speech or print; but the accessibility, speed, and reach of the Internet is of a different order. The Internet connects us anytime, anywhere and fast. The implications and consequences are enormous. And one of the greatest is twisted truth. We live in the Age of Truthiness: if it sounds true, it may be true; and, besides, no one can know for certain. We thought that science and technology, which brought us the Internet, would lead us to truth. Instead, it has led us to Fake News and a deep suspicion of others; not more transparency, but less; not greater confidence in our fellow human beings but less. Today we see everything and we see it instantly, but we don’t believe anything. Our default mode is distrust—distrust of Big Government, Big Business; Big Church; Big Science. Seeing has not led to believing. It has led to doubt; doubt not just about the truth of science but also doubt about fellow humans, which is ultimately grounded in our doubt about God. Let me cite one mundane example.
Our church leases Baytreat. A group calls and says they’d like to rent Baytreat. We send them a form; they complete it; send it back; enclose the deposit. The group enjoys their weekend; pays their balance—everyone’s happy, easy peasy, no big deal. Not so fast. Just this week, a group wanted to lease Baytreat. We sent them our form and a few days and phone calls later they sent us their form—three pages of legalese: function of space, guest room attrition, cancellation policy, indemnity; governing law and dispute resolution; insurance; and something called force majeure and labor disputes—a three page inquiry the renters wanted us to sign before they would sign. Talk about distrust, talk about doubt—where doubt reigns, law rules.

I get it—responsible groups can’t throw caution to the wind, but what in the world is our world coming to?

“Unless I see the marks . . . I will not believe.”

Thomas needed tangible proof, something more than his friend’s testimony. Thomas needed verification that the Crucified was risen; that the news of Jesus’ resurrection had not been fabricated, that it had not been imagined, that it was not a hoax, that the risen Christ was more than wishful thinking. Thomas needed to see in order to believe.

Jesus was standing right there and you would think that would be enough. Thomas has been absent a week earlier when Jesus appeared to the disciples—they told Thomas when he returned but the story was too good to be true. A week later when Jesus returned, Thomas still didn’t believe. Jesus stands there as big as life but Thomas refuses to believe his eyes.

Notice what Jesus says to Thomas. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his hands and side and when he does he tells Thomas: “Do not doubt but believe.” Jesus doesn’t want Thomas to remain in his doubt. Jesus doesn’t want Thomas to remain disconnected, despairing; hopeless. Jesus wants Thomas to believe, to be connected, filled with hope, confidence, freedom. We don’t know what Thomas did. John doesn’t say. Did Thomas reach out and touch Jesus? Did Thomas put his hand in his side? John doesn’t say. He simply reports Thomas’ reply: “My Lord and my God.” To which Jesus replied, “Have you believed because you have seen me?” The episode suggests that seeing does not led to believing. In fact, the converse is true: believing leads to seeing. Thomas had to trust before he could see.

It’s like a man in a burning building. The building is thick with smoke. The man is terrified. He can’t find his way out. He has only seconds to live. The man sees a light and then hears a voice: “Follow me. I’ll lead you to safety. Take my hand. Trust me.” Will the man take the firefighter’s hand or go it alone in the burning, smoke filled building?

New Testament scholar John Marsh observes that “the eye with which a man sees the one who sent Jesus Christ into the world is not located in any physical body. Physical seeing,” March writes, “can be as seriously questioned as any other experience.” Faith in Jesus as Lord and God is not based on raw data that can be weighed in the scales of reason. There is no proof that Christ is risen other than the testimony of others and the witness of the Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God.

Doubt is not the enemy of faith. Reason is not the enemy of faith. God is the author and giver of reason. And faith exists only amid doubt. Doubt is a tool of discernment. We’re not supposed to believe everything we hear or see. The Bible teaches us to discern the spirits, to test them. There is a vast difference between faith and gullibility. It’s not as if God gave us Jesus as a test to see if we’d qualify for heaven only after believing things we deem impossible and thus reward us for a willingness to believe the impossible. How silly is that? And besides—that makes faith all about us—faith in our faith. “I believe in creation out of nothing; I believe in the virgin birth; I believe in miracles.” Faith is not a matter of believing things we deem impossible or beyond reason.

Faith is confidence in God. Faith is confidence that God is worthy of our trust. Faith is courage to our lives and our future in God’s hands and not only our lives but that of creation itself. Faith seeks understanding. Faith is prior to understanding.

“Blessed are those who believe and have not seen.”
Jesus was talking about us—about all of us, about those who did not see him in Galilee or see him on the day of resurrection or in the weeks that followed when he appeared. Jesus was talking about those who believe based not what they saw, but what they—what we have heard, what we have read—“These things are written,” John says of his gospel, “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.”

Faith comes alive, we come alive, in the community of faith. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” God chooses the very human, flawed, mundane fellowship of others to birth faith. “Faith comes by what is heard.” And what is heard gives us sight and not only sight, but “life” in Christ, abundant life, eternal life, full of grace and truth. Amen.