

"LEARNING TO SEE"

John 20:24-34

October 28, 2018

But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master."

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"

Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

John's community found it hard to believe what they were hearing about the man called, "Jesus." It was quite a stretch to accept that a simple man before unknown around the Jewish community of the Romans, a man of no means and no pedigree, could have done all the things John and others said about him. He was not a priest. He was not a scribe or a Pharisee. He had no home, no chariot, no servants,

and no formal education. How could this be? How could this nobody be such a fabulous *somebody* such that his followers were willing to follow him to the cross?

Then there was the story that Jesus had beaten death, that he had been resurrected after his crucifixion and burial in a sealed tomb. The story told by John was that he showed himself four times- once to Mary and three times to his disciples- before leaving them all again. What happens next with Jesus is not explained in this gospel and no one else is said to have seen him.

John's readers were losing patience. Where was the *proof*? Where was the *evidence*? Where were the eyewitness accounts? This lack is indeed puzzling and suspicious when such an important happening is alleged!

There are many fascinating and puzzling pieces to John's resurrection text, but two jumped out at me this week so far:

First, we have to look at the context of Jesus' leadership and courage modeled for the persecuted peoples of Rome. Given that their hopes and promises are dashed by Jesus's arrest and execution and that they are left leaderless and despairing, his blessing the disciples upon his brief return with the words, "Peace to you," is rather strange. Of all the things he could say and that they needed to hear just then, it seems that "peace" was a word way down the list!

I should think that they would want to hear plans from the risen Christ for winning a cosmic war against Rome, for retribution and a freeing of Israel, or at the very least an escape route from additional persecutions! They are terrified, horrified, grieving, dismembered, and gasping for air. The text tells us in verse 19 that they are hiding out and "fearful of the Jews, they had locked all the doors in the house." Jesus curiously ignores their angst and their pain and simply wishes them well; "peace to you", he calmly says to them.

Weird. Where were they to find peace in the midst of their turmoil?

So, the first curiosity is that Jesus comes to the disciples bringing a message of peace. The second oddness to John's story is that Jesus only reveals himself to Mary Magdalene and to his disciples, no one else. Why not to Pilate or to the Pharisees? Why not to Caesar himself or to the masses in the public square?

Why not claim the Messiah moniker in a big splash way? John is trying to convince his readers of these wonderful happenings, yet he writes the reappearance of Jesus in only a few private settings to folks who are already believers that he is the promised Messiah. Also weird.

Thomas needs the proof. We seek the proof. The ancient readers wanted the proof, too. But Jesus says something very profound to Thomas that is our takeaway today. He says, "So you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for

those who believe without seeing." What does this mean? And if he thought this to be true, why would Jesus appear again to the disciples and Thomas apparently just so that Thomas could satisfy himself with the proof?

We are asked to take the Jesus story completely on faith. We have this whole church and this entire religious construction all based on hearsay. It is not in our nature to believe that what we cannot see or feel or taste or touch or hear for ourselves. It's not who we are, at least not once we have left the simple and trusting innocence of childhood. Experience has taught us to be sure, to have the golden ticket firmly grasped in our hand, to have the ring on our finger and the loop securely closed through our earlobe piercing. Yep, we want *security*.

And when we are denied these securities, we do not feel *blessed*. Rather, we feel weak; we feel ungrounded. We feel vulnerable. We are restless. So, Jesus, I don't get this one, I don't get it at all.

Such is John's context in the years following the punishing persecutions of Nero and his successors. Nero might very well have carelessly burned down most of Rome himself in AD 64, but he blames it on the Christians and then he *goes to town* on them to cover his own tracks. John is trying to convince the scared remnant of Jesus followers to stay true amid the bodies of their friends and families

torn to pieces by Nero's dogs or used as human torches to light the pathways of the terrorized cities and towns of the occupied lands.

It's a nearly impossible task. And so, he promises blessings to those who stay the course, who believe without seeing, who hold fast to Jesus in spite of it all. And miraculously, really when you think about it, the impossible task is accomplished. The faith lives on. Our ancestors in Christianity preserve the tradition and stories and blessings for us, though we never will see the proof of Jesus.

We will never see the proof of Jesus, but we will experience the evidence of his legacy in our hymns, in our Bible stories and poems, our prayers and our liturgy. We may never meet face to face with the risen Christ, we may never be invited to touch his flesh in the places that will prove the Gospel accounts, but we will experience the evidence of his legacy in the trusting eyes of the next generations, in our thriving church communities, and in our wish for a better tomorrow for those same little ones who so freely and inherently trust us, believing without seeing, smiling up at us without us first earning their love. We will see evidence of the promise of Jesus when our old ones close their eyes for the last time and we echo softly to them Jesus's words to the worried disciples, "Peace to you."

As Chris and I left our 5 little grandchildren earlier this week, they were wanting to know just one thing: When will you be back? They believe we love them; they have evidence of it, though we

can offer no proof. Love is like that. It just is. You can't see it, but you can see evidence of it. Peace is that way, too. You can't see it, but you can feel the presence of it.

Perhaps that's what Jesus is assuring Doubting Thomas and us 21st Century Christians, too. Perhaps he is telling us to suspend our need for the proof, and just feel his presence, and in that presence will be the greatest blessing of all.

May It Be So.