Sunday, April 7, 2002
SEEING AND BELIEVING
John 20:19-31

What happens after Easter? The easy answer is: attendance at worship in churches goes way down. Traditionally, the Sunday after Easter is called “Low Sunday.” One of the reasons for this is that we humans have trouble staying on any kind of high for very long. Holy Week can be an emotional roller coaster. On Palm Sunday, there is the parade of welcome built on high expectations. Then, as the week goes on, hope fades — there’s betrayal, desertion, and denial on Maundy Thursday, followed by the trial and execution on Friday where we confront the worship of death, and then the silence of the tomb on Saturday. Finally, Easter Sunday morning arrives with its record crowds, glorious music, and Easter brunches, and hope is reborn.

On Monday after Easter, it’s back to business as usual. Children return to school after the spring break. For the rest of us, it’s back to work. Go here, go there. The income tax deadline is not far away.

What happened after that first Easter? There are different stories in each of the four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In the gospel of John, we are told that on that first Easter Sunday evening, most of the disciples were gathered together in a house, and they had locked the doors because they were afraid. They had heard that Jesus was risen, but they hadn’t yet experienced, in person, the power of the risen Savior. Why did they lock the doors? What were they afraid of? John’s gospel states they were afraid of the Jews — that is, the religious authorities and leaders. Personally, I am convinced they were also afraid of the resurrected Jesus. There’s an ancient legend about Easter that implies this. According to the legend, one of the disciples comes to the house where they are gathered on Easter Sunday evening and says, “I’ve got good news and bad news. The good news is that Jesus is risen. The bad news is, he is very angry.”

According to the story in John’s gospel, even though the doors were locked, Jesus appeared among them. His first words were not angry ones at all. He said simply, “Peace be with you.” The fact that the doors were locked and Jesus came into their midst regardless is a revealing metaphor. The writer of the gospel wants you to remember that there is nowhere you can go where God cannot find you. You cannot lock God out of your life when God wants to enter. You can be locked in a prison cell in isolation; you can be alone in your room trying to hide from God; you can be in a crowd and feeling very lonely and afraid; you can be locked in your own grief or depression. You can try to run away, but God’s Spirit can find you. And when God’s Spirit finds you, the message will most likely be: “Peace be with you.” What beautiful words!

However, one of the disciples, Thomas, was not there that evening. Later (we don’t know exactly when — maybe the next day or even a few days later), the other disciples told Thomas, “We have seen the Lord. He came into the house last Sunday night where we were gathered, even though the door was locked.” But Thomas didn’t believe it. They thought Thomas would take their word for it. They had experienced Jesus in a new and powerful way. They went on to tell Thomas that Jesus was not angry because they had all deserted him. Rather, he had begun their healing with the words, “Peace be with you.”

Thomas said, according to John's account, "I don't believe it. 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."

If you didn't know it before, you know now where the term "Doubting Thomas" comes from. I can certainly identify with Thomas and his doubts, and I'm sure you can too. He dares to say what others are thinking. You want to believe, but you also want some proof. No one likes being duped. You're willing to meet God halfway if God will only show some kind of little sign.

The author of John's gospel knew the world is full of people like Thomas — not bad people, in fact frequently some of the very best people; those who are not afraid to doubt, not afraid to ask questions. In fact, it is the honest doubters in the world who are responsible for much of our progress. It was Galileo's doubt that the earth was the center of the universe that gave us a whole new way of understanding it. It was Einstein's doubt of many of the laws of physics in his time that led to a new way of seeing things.

Doubt can be a positive force. This kind of doubt is not the kind that rejects, but honors the process of questioning. Life is frequently a series of questions with answers that no longer fit. I believe our Christian faith works best when we are not always insisting on infallibility but when we are concerned with understanding our faith in relationship to the everyday events in our life and when we are not afraid of some skepticism or doubt.

According to the story in John's account of what happened after Easter — it was exactly one week later, the Sunday following Easter, that the disciples were again gathered in a house and the doors were shut. However, this time, Thomas was there. Once more, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst and had the same message, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas specifically, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Then he added these important words: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Here Jesus is talking about me and you. He's talking about every believer who has come along since then — those of us who have not had the privilege of meeting the risen Christ in the same way as Thomas and the other disciples. Fortunately for us, they knew it was important to keep telling the stories of what they had experienced so that their children and their children's children could participate in the wonders they had experienced. And so they wrote the story of Thomas and his doubts, which are also our doubts, and they included a blessing for all of us who follow: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Seeing and believing — they go together in many ways. People frequently say, like Thomas, "I have to see it in order to believe it." This story about Thomas tells us, "It's okay to have doubts. It's good to ask questions. Some things have to be seen or experienced in order to be believed." However, it's also important to remember that there are times when you should not necessarily believe what you have seen or what you have heard. There are times when it's good to question what you have seen or heard. I love watching good magicians — entertainers who are skilled at creating illusions. Then I have to remember not to believe what I am seeing. The illusionist has sawed the woman's body in half on the stage. I have seen him pull apart the two parts of the box with her head sticking out one end and her feet the other, and a large space in between. Am I to believe what I am seeing? Life is filled with illusions of all kinds. That's why the Bible, in another place, instructs us to "test the spirits to determine whether or not they are of God."

Believing and seeing are connected in another way. Not only are there times when, like Thomas, you want to see in order to believe — it's also true that there are times when what you believe will have a direct effect on what you see. It has been said that we do not see things as they are, but as we are. Our mood, our education, our training, our worldview, our past experiences, our prejudices, our likes, our dislikes — all of these things and more help condition the way in which we see things and interpret events. They affect our outlook on life.

For example, you might have been taught to believe from early on that people of certain ethnic groups or skin colors are your enemy or inferior, and then you will begin to see them as enemies and inferior, treat them as enemies and inferior, and they may, in fact, become your enemies and seem to you to be inferior. If, on the other hand, you deeply believe that all human beings are created in God's image, you will begin to see them that way and treat them that way, and that will, in turn, bring a different response. In other words, two or more people can see the same thing but see it differently because they believe differently, and then it changes the way they live. You can believe what you see, and you can also see what you believe. There were people in Jesus' time who believed he was a fraud and a heretic, so when they saw him heal people, they said he did it through the power of the devil. Beginning with the wrong premise, they came to the wrong conclusion.

Now you see why seeing and believing, and how they are connected, are so crucial. If you believe, as Jesus taught and as the Easter story affirms, that God is still actively creating and that life is not static or circular, that therefore tomorrow can be better than today, that progress is possible, that there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word — then you will continue to have hope. You will continue to want to grow in your understanding of God and in every kind of wisdom and learning until the day you die. Then life becomes exciting because it is not static or stagnant. The good news about Thomas is that he was willing to change his point of view.

We have no more information about the continuing spiritual journey of Thomas following his experience with the risen Christ. However, there were stories that circulated about him which did not make it into the New Testament. These stories suggest that he continued to grow and mature in his faith and wisdom. There was a collection of sayings attributed to him called "The Gospel of Thomas" which circulated in and around the early church. He not only opened his mind and continued to have his doubts and questions, but he also knew it was important to open all of his senses to experience God's Spirit. Deep faith grows from the heart as much as from the head, and it needs all of our five senses and more.

I'm convinced, even though I have no evidence, that Thomas discovered, as we all do, that in our spiritual journeys of growth and maturity, there is some suffering along the way. Why, when, and how remains a mystery. Our Christian faith takes suffering very seriously. My own experience with people who have undergone a lot of suffering is that they often mature faster than their counterparts who haven't. They also demonstrate considerably more empathy with others. It's amazing, too, how many of them later claim to be grateful for their suffering because it deepened them and helped them appreciate life so much more.

What happened after Easter? The disciples and others who have become "followers of the way" since then have continued to see the world through the "eyes of Easter." I said at the conclusion of last Sunday's Easter sermon that the world needs more Easter people, and I hope you are one of them. That's because when you see the world through the eyes of Easter,

you know that life is stronger than death. You are also convinced that God's love is stronger than any evil and that no power is strong enough to destroy the selfless love of God.

Seeing and believing in the story of Easter helps you to know that the only way you can ever find your life is to give it away.

Some of you are facing hardships and difficult decisions at this very moment. That could be the reason you are here in worship today. Others of you will be facing them. There is the hardship of readjusting one's personal life to a new situation. Maybe you have lost a loved one in death, and you have to remake the patterns of your life. Others may be facing the hardship of undertaking an unpleasant or very difficult task. And there may be those here who are faced with the hardship of breaking a habit that is destructive, deep-seated, and corroding. Believing and seeing your problems through the Easter story tells you once more that tomorrow can be better than today.

Seeing and believing the world around you through the lens of Easter gives you yet another truth about the world in which you live. The visible world around you is only a small fraction of the real world. This also means that this brief life which each one of you has on this earth is but a fraction of our eternal life with God.

So even though it's the weekend after Easter, even though worship attendance is not nearly as great, you need not limp back to business as usual. Remember the words of Jesus to his followers in that locked room on Easter Sunday and on the Sunday after Easter: "Peace be with you." Amen.