

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Easter
April 27, 2025
Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

"Believing Is Seeing"

It has only been a week since Easter but a lot has happened, hasn't it? Our lives run headlong into each day filled with activities and the distance between us and Easter grows greater with each passing day. Just a week ago we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord with enthusiasm, and yet many of us may be experiencing the same kind of letdown Thomas experienced in the upper room. The lilies are gone, the special music has been put back on the shelf, worship attendance has returned to normal (or maybe even below normal) and we are tempted to tune our hearts and minds to the sounds of the world to the exclusion of the liberating news of our resurrected Lord.

As illogical as this seems, it is a part of human nature to experience a letdown. It's no wonder that this particular Sunday is referred to among the clergy as "low Sunday," not only because it typically has very low attendance, but also because the darkness of the world has a way of dimming the memory of the brightness of Easter. Some people feel that after reaching their spiritual mountaintop on Easter Day, they have done all they need to do for a while (like until Christmas). Christ's call to discipleship during Holy Week or on Easter Day fades with each passing day. When we have no spiritual goal or direction, we do feel low. That's when the disciple Thomas become especially helpful. Thomas' strength is seen in the fact that he did not hide his doubts when he felt burned out.

Having missed the experience of seeing the risen Christ, he wanted the same personal encounter. To our amazement, Christ returned to the upper room one week later, almost as if to make sure that Thomas would have his opportunity for a personal encounter. A week earlier, Thomas blurted out his doubts and suspicions, which were honest expressions of that fuzzy area we all experience between faith and unbelief.

I don't doubt the sincerity of Thomas' doubts. He was reacting out of his sense of disappointment and frustration from having missed an encounter with the risen Lord. The encouraging aspect of Jesus' return to the upper room to confront Thomas is that it assures us that Christ will meet us more than halfway in order to bolster our faith. Christ didn't reject Thomas; he didn't chastise him or ridicule him for stating his honest concerns. What he did was to confront him and his doubts face-to-face.

That is reassuring for us when we have doubts. Doubt does not exclude us from the kingdom of God. About the only way to exclude ourselves is through apathy. It is much harder for Christ to reach an apathetic person than one who is merely doubtful. The implication of Thomas' remark is that "seeing is believing."

But there are problems with that notion, even though we blindly repeat it and apply it to much of our lives. What Thomas, you, and I are called to believe is not something we can see. The Gospel of John tells us that "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." What we are called to believe is the Easter faith in our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. We are called to recognize Jesus as the One anointed by God to bring us to life.

We cannot get this kind of believing simply through seeing, at least not in the ordinary sense of that word. To know Jesus to be the very image of our loving Father is a belief that must be reinforced through all our senses and all of our experiences. Seeing alone can be deceptive. Seeing is not believing; when it comes to faith, believing is seeing.

But Thomas' attitude is very much like that of most of us. We too want to make sure. We want proof and substantial evidence. We are skeptics. And that is not all bad. A measure of skepticism is necessary for our faith not to lapse into superstition. So, we can sympathize with Thomas. Here he was told by the other disciples of a happening he had not seen, a truly astounding occurrence. The risen Jesus had visited the others. Jesus was alive! They had seen him!

When they told Thomas the good news of Jesus' resurrection, he found such joy coming so soon after the bitter sorrow and disappointment of the crucifixion to be too much to swallow. What he first wanted to verify was the experience of suffering and pain, the nail prints and the wound in his side. In this he was right.

There are many who try to talk of Christian joy without reference to the reality of Christ's sufferings. To begin to believe in Jesus as the Christ, we must begin with the world as it is around us. The world is not a place filled with joy and light. Right now, even as we worship, people are suffering through the loss of loved ones, disease, accidents and tragedy. We cannot simply overlook the misery that surrounds us. Unpleasantness must be confronted. Often it is in the very act of embracing the unpleasant that the truth about life begins to dawn upon us.

When we see beyond what we can see, we embrace a kind of faith that will see us through the "dangers, toils and snares" of life. That's when we see with a different kind of sight. Even though Thomas declared his need to see Jesus in order to believe, what he needed was not sight, but insight.

That is precisely what happened when Jesus appeared a week later to all the disciples, including Thomas. The risen Lord offered Thomas to touch his hand and probe his side. But the offer was all Thomas needed. John doesn't tell us if Thomas ever took Jesus up on his offer. Instead, Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" The moment of recognition came for Thomas when he understood that the crucifixion and the resurrection are both embodied in Christ. Our world is a place where pain and pleasure, suffering and healing, life and death live side-by-side. Our world is a place where things are not always as they seem.

Ronald Kolzse wrote a newspaper editorial years ago about the deception of appearances and the Christ who lives within each of us. "Recently," wrote Mr. Kolzse, "I was flying home from a visit to England. I was standing in line at London's Heathrow Airport waiting to check my baggage. A few places ahead was a fellow American, a short plump man in his forties. He was wearing a rumpled brown jogging suit and a green, visored cap with 'Caterpillar Tractor' on its peak.

His carry-on luggage consisted of a plastic shopping bag filled with comic books and candy bars in one hand and a two-foot long model of a British military helicopter in the other. The man was speaking loudly in a flat Midwestern twang, first to the person in front of him and then to the person in back. He was recounting details about his tour of Windsor Castle which was, he allowed, 'not bad, but nothing compared to Disney World.' I cringed, slipped my passport into my pocket, and tried to look Australian. 'Another of that ubiquitous breed,' I mused, barely aware of my musing, *'Touristo Americanus Obnoxious Ultimo'*.

That comment about Disney World would be a great comic line, if he weren't dead serious. This guy is classic, lumpy middle America - K-Mart, McDonalds, AM radio, polyester suits, skinny ties - the entire tasteless catastrophe. Sitting next to him for seven hours would be time off in Purgatory. I wonder who's going to have to deal with that this trip?' I did not have to wonder for long.

Twenty minutes later I was in aisle seat 37C with Mr. K-Mart squeezed into 37B next to me. He smelled of milk chocolate and hair tonic. His plastic bag on the floor pressed against my leg, and his helicopter, resting on his lap, sent one of its blades into my ribs. He smiled and said hello and I did my wan best in return. What great sin in a past life, I asked, destined me for this? Then I disappeared into a copy of the *London Times* lest he start regaling me with accounts of his favorite Englebert Humperdink concerts.

Mr. K-Mart downed a Diet Pepsi ('What else,' I thought), thumbed through a copy of *People* magazine ('What else,' I thought), and fell into an open-mouthed sleep, snoring demurely. I felt reprieved.

Over Newfoundland, however, we hit a storm. The plane was bounced around and not far off there were flashes of lightning. The captain asked everyone to stay seated with seat

belts fastened. The huge 747 wallowed from side to side, and when we hit pockets of heavy turbulence, it shook and shuddered as if we were about to come apart. It wasn't really a dangerous situation, but it was scary. No one spoke. There was only the squeaking of tightly gripped armrests.

Then suddenly I heard, barely audible at first, someone humming the hymn, 'Amazing Grace.' I looked to my right and there was Mr. K-Mart, eyes closed but not asleep. His lips were pressed tightly together, a beatific look on his face. And he was humming - beautifully - in a rich full tenor and loud enough to be heard throughout our section of the plane. The melody of the hymn gently filled the silence of the moment and eased its tension. People, myself included, began to relax and to breathe normally again. When Mr. K-Mart finished there was a murmur of grateful applause.

Ten minutes later we were past the storm. Mr. K-Mart offered me a candy bar, and we began to chat. He was a farmer from Kansas, and his great love was gospel singing. He had just been on an exchange visit to a church in a lower-class area in London. He was married, had no children of his own, but he and his wife had helped raise twelve foster children. The comics and candy were for two children now with them. The helicopter was for a boy at his church whose father had recently died. We stopped talking when the plane began its descent into Boston.

I began again to muse about Mr. K-Mart, about how I had so facilely labeled and evaluated him and about how he was different and deeper than I had thought. I felt blessed. I recalled the Hindu greeting, 'Namaste,' which means, 'I recognize before all else the divine essence in you' and decided it was not a bad way to greet others. When we parted, Mr. K-Mart smiled broadly and said, 'Come visit the farm any time and stay as long as you can. It's not much for a writer from Boston,' he apologized, 'but it's peaceful and real pretty.' As we shook hands, his hand in mine was rough, large, and very warm. 'Thank you very much,' I said. 'Thank you very, very much.'

Mr. K-Mart no doubt thought I was thanking him for the invitation. I was, but I was thanking him for more. As he walked away, complete with plastic bag and helicopter, I whispered after him under my breath, a little late, but perhaps not too late, 'Namaste, Namaste.'"

When it comes to faith, seeing is not believing, but believing is seeing. When we believe we see beyond the apparent. When we believe we see what God sees – the face of God in every person we meet. When we believe we see that there is no one we meet today or any day who is not loved unconditionally by God. When we believe we see that there is goodness and grace all around us, sometimes lurking below the surface. When we believe we see resurrection possibilities even in the most hopeless situations. When we believe we see God

at work behind the scenes, between the scenes, above the scenes and beyond the scenes to counter the push and pull of the world. When we believe we see why Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Seeing is not believing after all; believing is seeing....the world as God sees it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen