

Thomas R. Cook  
Stephen's Church – Edina , Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Second Sunday of Easter; April 23, 2017

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## “Believing is Seeing”

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Scripture: John 20:19-31  
Note: Preached on the Sunday of 2017 Spring TEC Weekend.

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You're not going to believe this... I saw Jesus.

Now, being a people of spiritual depth who proclaims a hope in the Resurrection, I would expect that you might ask: “Well, what does he look like?” And this is what I would say to you...

All weekend long, I've seen a thousand smiles on the faces of 200 teenagers who've been together in our church buildings for TEC, all weekend long telling each other about the love they have found in Jesus. I've seen beautiful tears shed as young people tell each other how much they are loved by God and each other. I've seen the firm and resolute faces of young women and men as they spoke of unspeakable sadness in their lives, yet proclaimed the love of God that brought them from the brink of their own despair. I've seen a man who by all rights might have died three times before he ever came to adulthood; I watched him show us his scars and his disabilities; and then I heard him say that he lived with joy because of Jesus his Lord.

What does Jesus look like? He looks like the faces of those young people. He shows the scars of this sometimes-devastating human life. His face can express the truth of sorrow, the hope of joy, and the conviction that love can make us whole. He encompasses many colors, many shapes, many identities. That's what Jesus looked like when I saw him. And as I moved among the resurrection experience of TEC this weekend, sharing life and stories with the teens drawn together by faith, I couldn't help but think of Thomas the Apostle, who in his own moment of clear vision, sees the one he was looking for and acclaims "My Lord and my God."

I remember a time long ago when I was visiting a member of a parish I was serving. She was quite elderly, having cared tremendously for her family all her life. Her daughter and grandchildren lived in her home. She was their rock. But she knew it was time to go. When her body was failing, I was with her in the hospital room one quiet afternoon, where she was sleeping, hovering somewhere between consciousness and, well... death, when she pushed herself up in bed, opened her eyes, and looked to one corner of the room, as she carried out a completely lucid conversation with someone I could not see or hear. I told her daughter what I had witnessed; I named names I had heard spoken. And her daughter told me, without a hint of incredulity or surprise, that her mother was conversing with another of her children who had died when only a little girl. This wasn't the first such conversation, and apparently, she had seen Jesus with her daughter. And no one was frightened or skeptical or concerned.

It simply was. They believed it. And again I thought of Thomas, maybe I felt a little like Thomas... “My Lord and my God.”

Believe me, there have been times when I thought that all of my spiritual misgivings, all my doubts, all my lack of faith could be allayed simply by a personal visit from the Almighty like the one granted to Thomas. *Just prove it, Lord, and let's be done with it.* But in this skeptical day and age, I'm not entirely sure even that would work. I have witnessed some incredible things in this life. I have known people who have lived through the most terrible of times, yet have retained a sense of joy and wonder in this world by trusting that Jesus is with them. I have known people who have chosen to live and minister in some of the most dangerous places in this world, because it is there that they can see Jesus. From some of the sickest people I have ever known, I have learned something of what Jesus looks like, as I have seen them embrace their lot, give up the illusion of control over their lives, and trust that God is with them, scars, suffering, weaknesses and all. What more do I need in order that I might believe?

See, here is my less than professional theological theory... It's sort of like the Symmetric Principle of Mathematics. If a quantity “A” is equal to a quantity “B”, then it stands to reason that the quantity “B” is equal to the quantity “A”. You can say it either way, but it amounts to the same thing.  $A=B$ ;  $B=A$ . So, in other terms...

if, as we say, “seeing is believing”, then perhaps it stands to reason that “believing is seeing.” Our vision in faith is clarified when we take the risk to believe, when we trust the words and witnesses like those we hear in Scripture this morning.

When we believe, or when we try to live as though we do, it is then that we begin to more clearly see the presence and the work of the risen Jesus all around us. Things begin to make more sense. When I see some of you carrying the tremendous burdens of your grief or your illnesses, yet you remain hopeful and grateful and kind and helpful, to the best of your abilities, I see that you are not in this alone; I see Jesus with you.

You know, I gather that many people might claim this story of the so-called “doubting” Thomas as a kind of contemporary nod to the necessary skepticism of this age. We live in a time that demands proof. So many require that they be convinced by measures and experiments and observations to believe in Jesus’ resurrection. Thomas said it pretty clearly: *Unless I see... I will not believe.* But I don’t believe that entirely.

You know what I think? I think Thomas is hurt. I think he is grieving. I think he is left out of one of the most profound experiences of the risen Christ, when all the other of the Apostles get a chance to see Jesus in that locked house, yet he does

not. I think he is obstinate. I think he needs reassurance. I think we all do. And I think Thomas already believes; at least he wants to. This is Thomas after all, who has followed Jesus as faithfully as any other of his companions ever did. This is Thomas, who when Jesus calls his followers to go to the home of Lazarus remarks that he is ready to go even if it means to die with him. This is Thomas asks Jesus “how can we know the way?” I suggest that even in Thomas’ case, believing leads to seeing as much as seeing leads to believing.

It’s often an uneven road we travel in this faith in Jesus. It’s sometimes hard to get a glimpse of him. But as Thomas Keating, one of the architects of the contemporary movement of Centering Prayer, once said:

*The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound. These make room inside us for the Holy Spirit to come in and heal. What prevents us from being available to God is gradually evacuated. We keep getting closer and closer to our center. Every now and then God lifts a corner of the veil and enters into our awareness through various channels, as if to say, “Here I am. Where are you? Come and join me.”*

I love that image... “Every now and then God lifts a corner of the veil and enters into our awareness...” Every now and then we get a glimpse of Jesus at work in this world. We may want to see it in order to believe it. But perhaps when we allow ourselves to believe it, that’s when we really begin to see it.