

**Acts 5:27-32**  
**Psalm 118:14-29**  
**Revelation 1:4-8**  
**John 20:19-31**

**Sermon**  
**By**  
**The Rev. Stephen Askew**

**2nd Sunday of Easter**  
**April 24, 2022**  
**St. John, Flat Rock**

After our long journey through Lent and the glorious celebration on Easter Day, we now proclaim in faith, "Alleluia, Christ is Risen, the Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!" After all, Mary Magdalene gave witness to seeing the risen Lord on that first Easter morning and reported Jesus' words to the disciples - "...go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'." But neither the story of our risen Lord, nor our own story as his followers ends there.

For most of us, "seeing is believing." From the time of our first science class, we have been trained to base knowledge and truth on empirical data, that which can be scientifically observed, measured, and weighed; after converting our antiquated English system of measurement to the universal metric system. Jesus, well aware of human needs and weaknesses, carried out many signs during his earthly ministry to help his followers believe that he was sent from God. As John states in his gospel, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God..." Still, there are those who are reluctant to believe. So, it should be no surprise that the testimony of Mary, as powerful, sincere, and truthful as it was, did not entirely ease the minds of those who did not see for themselves.

Perhaps that is why there are multiple accounts of the appearance of the risen Christ in the various gospels. Even raised from the dead, Jesus continued to minister to the needs of his followers. In John's gospel, it is in the evening of that very first day on which Jesus appeared to Mary, that he then appeared to the disciples, who were gathered in fear of the Jews behind locked doors. Through his appearance, the risen Lord brought his disciples peace, assured them that they had not been left alone, and bestowed on them strength and power through the Holy Spirit. "Seeing is believing!"

The disciples in turn gave witness to Thomas, called the twin, who for whatever reason was not with the others at Jesus' appearance. His reaction was, "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." Could we, should we, fault Thomas? Is he any less human than the other disciples? Is he any less human than we are? Are we not in many ways his twin - fellow doubters needing to see in order to believe?

Yet Thomas, who wanted to believe, and did come to believe, is still most readily and unfortunately known as "doubting Thomas." Doubt, as we know, can lead to death and destruction. Many years ago now, I was called to serve as rector of a church which at its founding chose the name of St. Thomas. As I explored their history, I learned that this name was chosen very intentionally, because as the initial small group of faithful followers met in homes and tried to grow and prosper, there was some considerable

doubt among them as to whether they could really make it as a mission, much less as a parish. Their very DNA contained that of "doubting Thomas." During the years I served as their rector, I tried to assure them, and myself, that Thomas did not remain a doubter, and neither should we, but rather believe in what God was calling us to do in that place and at that time. So, I was saddened to read recently that St. Thomas parish, after a long struggle to survive, permanently closed its doors.

But fortunately for Thomas the twin, a week after Jesus appeared to the disciples without him, he again appeared to the disciples, and this time Thomas was there. The Lord spoke directly to Thomas and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." **Do not doubt but believe!** For Thomas, as for Mary, and as it was for the other disciples, "seeing is believing." Even without touching the wounds of the Lord, Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God?" These words of belief and faith form the climax of John's gospel.

Yet following the confession of Thomas, Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." You see, after these early appearances of the resurrected Christ, our Lord did not continue to appear before those who demanded to see in order to believe. Belief for the next generation of followers would have to be based on the Word - the word and witness of those who had seen. Indeed, it is said that Thomas, with nothing more to offer than his own testimony, was later sent to take the Good News to the Parthians,

Medes, and Persians, eventually reaching India and the Malabar coast, where there are still to this day those who call themselves "Christians of Thomas."

Is not our own faith that which is based on the Word and the witness of those who came before us, empowered by the Holy Spirit? As one commentator points out, today's reading from John's gospel marvelously combines Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Pentecost all into one. When Jesus, raised from the tomb, appeared to his disciples on that first Easter Sunday, he then breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The Lord empowered his followers to be his presence in the world and carry out the work he had begun on behalf of the Father. This is why the story of Christ did not end with his resurrection, and why our own story as his followers continues. We are empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit, which we cannot see, but somehow know and believe is present and working in our midst.

In today's church, it is no longer seeing that leads to our believing. Quite the opposite - it is our believing that leads to seeing. Through our belief in the risen Christ, we learn to see the face of Christ in others, to see our Lord's immeasurable love at work in the world, to see miracles take place in our midst, to see hope where there is despair, to see the possibility of new life where there is death, and to see victory where there is defeat. And through belief in the power of the Holy Spirit, we learn to see that we can be God's agents of change and transformation.

I am deeply moved that this Sunday, St. John in the Wilderness is holding a fund raiser for the Flat Rock Backpack Program. The Backpack Program was begun 14 years ago when several people from St. John in the Wilderness learned that there were school children who were going hungry over the weekends, when they did not receive school meals. The **faith** and **belief** of these parishioners enabled them to **see** that something could be done to change this situation. With the leadership of parishioner Debby Staton, who had recently retired as a teacher in the school system, a program was put in place to meet this need. Beginning with 8 middle school children in one school, the program has grown to serve over two hundred children in 7 different schools and childcare facilities! Yes, "believing is seeing!"

The fund raiser, Empty Bowls, will take place after church today, with seating at 12:30, then at 5:00 pm, and 6:00 pm. Tickets provide attendees a soup meal and the choice of a pottery bowl donated by local artisans. Most importantly, it helps fund the Backpack Program. The vision of a few believers has grown, and we can join in! The story of the risen Christ and our own story continue!

Where will our journey take us next? If for our generation of followers "believing is seeing," then let us look outward to discern new opportunities where the Good News can not only be shared, but also made a reality. It may be in the checkout line at the grocery store, where we see someone ahead of us unable to pay for those few items he

or she carefully chose, hoping to make it to the next paycheck. It may be checking in on a neighbor on the anniversary of the death of a spouse, child, or parent. It may be noticing that a colleague did not make it in to work and giving that person a call. We may leave an anonymous note of thanks or support for someone who rarely gets recognition. Such opportunities are only limited by our vision, which becomes keener as we practice using it.

Being the human beings that we are, some of us may wonder why, in this day and age so far removed from that first Easter Day, the risen Lord doesn't continue to put in an appearance now and then to boost our faith and strengthen our belief. I would argue that he does, more than any one of us will ever know. Look around you today, and you will see him in those working to alleviate the hunger of our school children, and in countless others whose belief lead them to see and respond to the needs of friends and strangers.

The miracle of Easter is that **no one** has to remain a "doubting Thomas." Our Lord wants us **all** to believe. Those who now believe and see make it possible for others to see and believe, believe that Christ has truly been raised and is still at work in the world. And so it is, we the church can continue to proclaim **without any doubt**, "Alleluia, Christ is risen, the Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!"

