

Easter 2 C Sermon
John 20:19-31
April 24, 2022

Seeing Is Believing
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."
²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."
²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."
²⁴But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."
²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."
²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."
²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"
²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 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, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

~o~

St. Thomas holds forth in the Upper Room. “I won't believe until I can place my fingers into the holes in His hands and His feet and thrust my hand into the wound in His side.” Just then the Risen Christ enters. “Tom,” Jesus says, “the boys and I have been talking, and we're all afraid that you're becoming just a little too weird for our group.”¹

It is a “weird” thing to say right? How many of us have ever wanted/needed to put our fingers inside someone’s open wound? Besides the generally unpleasant feeling of touching someone’s actual insides, you could introduce harmful bacteria that could lead to an infection. So gross!

We’re going to pretend, for the sake of Thomas’ reputation that he merely wanted to see the wounds in Jesus’ hands and feet and side. He seems a little less creepy that way and the truth is, I like Thomas. In fact, a lovely hand-painted Greek Orthodox icon of Thomas hangs in my study, right next to the one of Mary Magdalene. I can relate to him, but only about wanting to see proof and not the fingers in the wounds bit. If we’re completely honest with ourselves, I’d guess that most of us can relate to Thomas on this one.

When I was a kid and I decided to make a public profession of my faith (what you commonly hear called, “Getting Saved”) the pastor asked me, in front of the whole congregation, if I believed the Bible. The truth is, I struggled, even as a seven-year-old to accept that there was a *real* Noah’s Ark still resting in decay on some faraway mountaintop in Turkey. My doubts about the historicity of the Bible weren’t limited to the flood story. It would have been so much easier on my conscience to say ‘yes’ to the pastor’s

¹ George Wagner. “Doubting Thomas,” Shipoffools.com, July 11, 2005, http://forum.ship-of-fools.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=61;t=000034.

question if someone had taken believable photos of the Ark!

I like Thomas. I can relate to him, but Thomas has gotten a bad wrap from us churchy types. We make jokes about him, call him doubting Thomas – he’s practically the archetype for a person of weak faith.

The famed evolutionary biologist, author, and atheist, Richard Dawkins once observed that: “The story of Doubting Thomas is told, not so that we shall admire Thomas, but so that we can admire the other apostles in comparison. Thomas demanded evidence ... The other apostles, whose faith was so strong that they did not need evidence, are held to us as worthy of imitation.”² Dawkins isn’t wrong. In fact, the author of John’s gospel gives away their motives in the final verse of today’s text. They write: “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” It feels wrong to say that the author had an axe to grind, but they certainly had a strong motive for writing their gospel and it wasn’t to make Thomas look good!

Science, however, does redeem Thomas’ image a bit. We now know that our brains are wired to respond first to visual input. It’s how we’re wired. Images are the pathway to human emotions, and emotions govern how people make decisions and what they believe about the world.³ That said, it’s completely reasonable that Thomas wanted to see some kind of empirical evidence that the one his pals had seen was actually Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and somehow back from the dead.

And yet, the very nature of Christian faith demands that we believe, accept, wrestle with, honor, and commune in and with things we cannot always see. Therein lies our challenge. On the

² Richard Dawkins. *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

³ “Seeing Is Believing,” Resource-media.org, <http://www.resource-media.org/visual-story-lab/report/>.

one hand, we are human beings and wired to respond to visual input; we are intellectually curious and, as people in the United Church of Christ and the congregational tradition, we honor the truths of science and academia; we are logical and we trust empirical evidence over unverifiable hearsay; we are realists, placing our trust in the hard work of capable people to create change in the world.

On the other hand, we are people of faith; we are spiritually curious and we honor the experiences of individuals on their unique spiritual journeys; we trust in the ultimate goodness of life, creating, and recreating and sustaining and blessing the world around us; we are dreamers who believe in the power of love to birth resurrection in the world. In short, we are a paradox, we are an amalgam of things that, though they seem like contradictions, are actually not. Being a thoughtful person of faith is about accepting that simple truth. We are a paradox and as such we can say with certainty that seeing is believing, but “sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can’t see.”⁴

Thomas was a paradox too. In John’s gospel, Thomas was the first to suggest that the disciples follow Jesus to their deaths when he returned to Judea to go to Lazarus’ tomb. Thomas demanded proof of the resurrected Jesus, but afterwards, he spent years evangelizing in India where many converted, influenced by the power of his testimony. He died there as a martyr for his faith.

Like Thomas, like all of us, Christianity at its best is a paradox. At its worst, however, Christianity is a narrow path based on an even narrower understanding of Jesus and the Bible. At its worst, it incites hatred for other religions, labels many as outside of God’s love, views science and academics as a threat, justifies war and violence, neglects those most in need, even the earth itself, and places the importance of right belief over the imperative of right

⁴ Chris Van Allsburg. “The Polar Express,” Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985.

action. To take the paradox out of Thomas, out of you and me, out of Christian religious faith, is to strip away its greatest value because it contains both humanity and transcendence, personal experience and mystery, sinners and saints, love for the world and desire to see heaven's realm in it, the value of belief and the imperative to act.

True Christianity will always be a paradox, so stop fretting if you struggle with the story of Noah's ark, or a virgin birth, or the meaning of the sacraments. Wrestle with questions about what happens when we die and the meaning of resurrection and the life of faith.

Seeing is believing, but sometimes the most real things in the world are the things we can't see. Don't get frustrated. Live the paradox. Live the resurrection. Live the faith, today and always. Amen.