

NOT SEEING...AND BELIEVING

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, April 12, 2015

Second Sunday of Easter – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Text: John 20:1-31 (NRSV, lightly adapted)

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!”

(which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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 for fear of the [Jewish authorities], 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. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), 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.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

[Image: "Jesus Shows His Wounds," http://ecx.images-amazon.com/images/I/51S%2BATRAHeL._SS500_.jpg]

No one actually witnessed Jesus' resurrection. No one actually saw what happened to Jesus' body between sundown on Good Friday and sunrise on Easter Sunday. But the things that Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple and Peter and the rest of the disciples and Thomas **did** see led them to believe that God had raised Jesus from death, that God had breathed into him the breath of resurrection life. Later, the Apostle Paul, many years after his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road, would begin his letter to the Romans with his belief that Jesus "was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4).

Seeing is believing, we are fond of saying. Seeing **as** believing plays a major role in today's reading from the gospel according to John. The story tells us that the beloved disciple went into the empty tomb and saw and believed. When Mary Magdalene first saw the risen Jesus, she didn't recognize him; it was only when she heard him call her by name that she saw and believed. On Easter evening, when the risen Jesus first appeared to the disciples, they saw and rejoiced. A week later, when Jesus appeared again to the disciples and showed Thomas the mark of the nails in his hands, Thomas saw and believed. (Note that Thomas does not actually touch the marks of the nails on Jesus' risen body: Thomas sees and believes. In fact, Thomas comes to a more perfect belief than anyone else in this Gospel: "My Lord and my God," he says in joy and awe to Jesus.)

Seeing **as** believing is not, however, the end of the story in the gospel according to John. Jesus' final words in chapter 20 are addressed, not to eyewitnesses like Mary and Peter and the Beloved Disciple and Thomas, but to subsequent generations of believers. In this final scene, we can visualize Jesus saying to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Then we see Jesus turning to us, the audience in the "darkened theater of the future,"¹ and hear him saying to us, "Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

So what exactly have we come to believe, we who have not actually **seen** Jesus, who have not seen either the empty tomb or Jesus in the garden or the Risen One appearing among his friends?

One of my favorite spiritual writers, Nora Gallagher, uses this image for her struggles to believe in Jesus' resurrection:

"Belief and disbelief in the resurrection trade places in my heart like 'watchmen taking shifts,' as the writer Paul Elie puts it. I've known for years that even those words—'belief' and 'disbelief'—don't really describe what I think when I think about the resurrection. Something happened to [Jesus], is the way I put it to myself. Something happens to me."²

Something happened to Jesus after his crucifixion and burial. Something unexpected and unprecedented happened to some of Jesus' followers after his crucifixion and burial: he appeared to them in places where they had gathered.

¹ Raymond Brown, *Commentary on John*, Anchor Bible vol 29A, 1049.

² Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen – a Year Lived in Faith*, 137.

(The only recorded appearances of the Risen One to individuals were to Mary Magdalene and to Jesus' brother James and to the Apostle Paul.)

For me, as for Nora Gallagher, belief and disbelief in the resurrection trade places in my mind like watchmen changing shifts. For me also, belief and disbelief in some of the claims of astronomy and astrophysics trade places in my mind like watchmen changing shifts. But then I think: well, if God can create billions of galaxies, then God can certainly create resurrection. And just as we can trust astronomers and astrophysicists to interpret the universe for us, so also we can trust the traditions handed on to us by those witnesses who interpret Jesus' life and death and resurrection for us.

For the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the Gospel, the “good news” of Jesus Messiah cannot be understood apart from the flesh-and-blood life of Jesus of Nazareth. It's also true, for Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, that the flesh-and-blood life of Jesus cannot be fully understood or appreciated apart from his post-crucifixion appearances to his disciples. By contrast, Paul seems to have no interest in the flesh-and-blood life of Jesus: for Paul, the only thing that really matters about Jesus is Jesus' death and resurrection.

This is one of the reasons I have difficulty with Paul. It's the same difficulty I have with the ancient creeds of the church: the only things they tell us about Jesus' life are that he was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. It's the same problem I have with Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, which is all about brutality and torture. In fact, apart from any sense of who this Jesus of Nazareth was, Paul and the creeds and the passion are all about gratuitous violence and suffering.

When we know what we know about Jesus of Nazareth from the Gospels, and when we know what we know about the socio-political context of first-century Palestine, we understand that Jesus was not the victim of gratuitous violence. He was not caught in the crossfire of a drive-by shooting. His death was not collateral damage during a military occupation. He was not killed by an abusive father. Jesus' death was the direct and predictable result of state-sponsored violence that was sanctioned and encouraged by religious leaders.

In this kind of context, Jesus' resurrection was a clear rebuke to the religious and political leaders who thought they had found a permanent solution to the problem of Jesus: crucify him, make him suffer, torture him, let him hang on a cross for everyone to see, let his suffering and death serve as a deterrent to any potential rabble-rousers in the Passover crowds. In the words of the High Priest Caiaphas, “it is better for [us] to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50).

When Jesus' friends took his body down from the cross, there was no doubt that he was dead. When they put his body in the tomb and rolled the stone across the entrance, there was no doubt that he was dead. As far as everyone was concerned—Jesus' enemies as well as Jesus' friends—Jesus' death was the last word. For Jesus' religious and political enemies, the problem was solved. For Jesus' friends and followers, their hopes and dreams were dashed.

What the New Testament makes clear, in a variety of ways, is that Jesus' death on a cross was not the last word. Neither the satisfaction of Jesus' enemies nor the sorrow of his friends and followers lasted very long. Certain things happened to his friends and followers that provided for them conclusive proof that God had intervened in the narrative to raise Jesus from the dead. The resurrection validated and confirmed Jesus' identity and authority as the beloved Son of God. Those to whom the risen Jesus appeared were never the same after that encounter.

So what about us? What about me? I've never had an encounter with the risen Jesus. I've never had a Jericho Road experience or an Emmaus Road experience or a Damascus Road experience. Do we need to have our own personal experiences of the risen Jesus in order to believe in the resurrection? Or can we trust what the risen Jesus said to empirical Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"? Can we trust that believing in Jesus is a beautiful thing that leads to a loving way of life?

The simple answer to these questions is this: it is in and through the worship and witness of the church, the local congregation of seekers and believers, that we encounter the risen Jesus. In music, in prayer, in scripture, in sermon, in story, in sacrament, in friendship, in service: these are all ways in which we learn to trust the authority and the truth of Jesus.

Deep in my heart, I do believe that the story of Jesus is a true story about a first-century Palestinian Jew who "who lived and died and rose again for [the] cause [of reconciliation,] of bringing God to us and us to God and so also of reconciling us to each other and to our world."³ I do believe that in Jesus Christ, the human being from Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, God has indeed come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the world to God.

Deep in my heart, I do believe that in and through this Jesus, crucified and risen, God calls us into the church, to accept the cost and joy of discipleship. I do believe that God promises, to all who trust God enough to follow Jesus, forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, God's presence in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in God's realm which has no end.

Belief in the resurrection is really about the whole gospel, the whole story centered on Jesus and the Way. The whole gospel, the whole story, is not only about Jesus' death and resurrection: it's also about the life that he lived, the way in which he walked. The whole gospel, the whole story, is not just about life after death for Christian believers: it's also a story about the embodied lives we are called to live, the human ways in which we are called to walk. The whole gospel, the whole story, is a true story: it was true for Jesus' first followers in their time, and it's true for us in our time. May this story continue to inspire us to love boldly and act wisely, to believe in Jesus, and through believing to have life in his name.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 43-44.