

"There's a bit of Thomas in All of Us." Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Ps. 16;
John 20:19-31
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
Rev. David E. Young
The Second Sunday of Easter, March 30, 2008

We often have heard the phrase: "Seeing is believing". Like other common expressions, this one is used because it connects to our experience.

In many ways, on a daily basis, we encounter situations and we make observations that confirm this basic notion: "Seeing is believing."

We tend to trust our senses. We rely on them, and not just on our sight.

When we see a container of leftovers in the refrigerator, we may see the date on it. We eyeball it, but then we smell it. We might even take a little, teensy taste of it.

We know, from experience, that just looking at a container of milk in the fridge isn't enough to convince us that it is still good, especially after we've had a deep drink of ice-cold, but slightly turned milk. Yes, it can turn us off to milk for a while!

When I lead a group at the 1016 House for drug and alcohol rehab, those who are there know that they face an uphill climb to get back into the good graces of family and friends, many of whom won't believe they have changed. They know that when they try to convince others that things will be different, they will face variations on the phrase "Oh yeah? I'll believe it when I see it!"

And we've all said things like: "I never would have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

But, appearances can also be deceiving:

Beauty often really is only skin deep.

I've been fooled by the silk flowers. You have to go up and touch them because you almost can't believe your eyes.

In an age of holographic images, computer enhancements, morphing, photo shop, spy thrillers that include complete make-overs and changed identities, it's often dangerous to trust too much in our own sight.

Moving into the Biblical realm, we encounter similar advantages and limitations to our sight:

Earlier in John's Gospel we hear other things that emphasize seeing and believing: "We beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father."

John the Baptist boldly says: "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

In the various accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, there are numerous times when we learn of the results of seeing:

- Mary comes to the tomb and sees the stone rolled away
- Peter and John look into the tomb and see the grave clothes neatly folded and the angel who tells them the good news.

-the grief stricken disciples have to be shaken out of their despair by the appearance of Jesus who shows them his wounds and even takes a piece of fish, eating it to dramatize the reality of his presence with them.

But the Bible also tells us of mistaken identity and the limitations of sight:

-Mary sees Jesus in the garden and mistakes him for the gardener. She needs more than her eyes to confirm who this one is.

-the 2 disciples who walked the road to Emmaus alongside Jesus did not know who he was either by his looks or by his voice. It was only in the breaking of the bread at supper that they recognized him.

Still, the importance of the eye witness remains – especially the credible and responsible eye witness, because, after all is said and done, seeing is believing.

The resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples involve sight almost more than anything else. Here in John's account of Easter evening the disciples don't react to Jesus until he shows them his hands and side.

Unfortunately Thomas was away that night and didn't see the risen Lord. He couldn't believe based on the words of the others. He couldn't trust their testimony on this crucial point.

But rather than branding him "Doubting Thomas", perhaps we should just call him "Absent Thomas". He missed seeing the resurrection appearances of Jesus. He simply wanted the same

kind of firsthand, visual confirmation that the others had needed and had gotten before he did.

Or maybe we should call him, "Courageous Thomas". He had the courage to be out and about when the others were cowering in fear behind closed doors. Maybe we should call him Courageous Thomas because he has the guts to say what many of us may be thinking - - about how hard it is to believe where we have not seen.

Regardless of the reason for his absence on Easter evening, what we do know is that one week later Thomas is with them

I have often thought about that week, (this past week to be exact). But it could be any week, or any length of time in which we have held onto a difference of opinion with others whom we love. I don't know about you, but the time seems to go so slowly. It seems almost like an eternity.

I imagine having a sharp difference of opinion with a dear friend. What is your relationship like until things get resolved? What is it like if you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are right and they are wrong?

What if the issue isn't some silly old thing, but is a difference of opinion on the resurrection of the Lord?

It's hard for me to imagine what it would have been like without the gift that Jesus gave the others on that Easter night.

Jesus has spoken "Peace" to them. He doesn't say, "Where were you when I needed you?" He doesn't condemn them or guilt them.

He offers peace and a restored relationship. What an incredible gift!

Once they have received the Peace of Christ, it is possible for them to move forward into new life. Once they have received this gift it is possible for them to remain in community and fellowship with one another even though they have such strong differences of opinion.

They don't throw Thomas out or issue ultimatums. Thomas is the only one who issues an ultimatum and it isn't directed at the others, but at God. "Unless I see the nail marks and put my finger in them and in his side, I won't believe."

We've already heard how Jesus answered Thomas in his need and how he spoke to all of the blessings that can come even when their faith is not based on sight but on the gift of God's Spirit.

We stand in a long tradition of people whose faith origins rest upon the eye witness accounts of those who were willing to die for what they believed. For them, it wasn't so much that "seeing was believing". No, for them, believing became the most important way of seeing. They saw everything in the light of Easter! And that belief gave them new life in Christ.

Even though we are not in a position to see things as they did or believe based on that same kind of firsthand experience of the risen Christ, we are in a position to experience the same kind of transformation:

We too are Easter people: Everything is different because of the empty tomb. More than that: As people of faith, we are guided more by our faith than our sight.

To believe in Christ is to see things differently.

It means that sometimes we refuse to accept the way things are, the way they seem, and we hold out for a different vision, a different view of life.

It is to see and acknowledge God's presence in the world, and instead of saying: "I'll believe it when I see it," we say and we affirm: "**I see it, because I believe it.**"

But this doesn't mean we wait around passively for things to change!

The apostles saw things differently and they went out in the power of the Spirit of God to transform the world.

We also rely on the Spirit to open up our minds to understand the Scriptures, and to give us the eyes of faith to see beyond appearances.

And when we see sincere Christians acting on what they believe:

- By taking time to teach others,
- By modeling a responsible and caring lifestyle,
- By sharing of their resources with others,
- By working together to ease the burdens of others ...

When we see these things happening, we know that the power of Christ to transform our lives is a **present reality!**

So, my prayer this day is that the bit of Thomas that is in each of us may be more than met by the gift of God's Spirit that

reassures us in our doubts and opens the eyes of our hearts to see where Christ is at work in the world and where we too can be at work for Christ's sake, bringing a message of hope and of peace and of new life to all.

May it be so, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

