

**Seeing Is Not Believing**

April 11, 2021

**John 20: 19-31**

*<sup>19</sup> When 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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

*<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So 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."*

*<sup>26</sup> A 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." <sup>27</sup> Then 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." <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> 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."*

*<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> 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.*

Acts 4: 32-35 (*but sometimes we can see it*)

*<sup>32</sup> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*



Today we delve into the risen Christ's interaction with Thomas, who believed only after he saw the nail holes and the wound in Jesus' side, and into the faith shown

by believers and apostles in the early church in Acts 4, a faith clearly visible to the world outside the church. On our own journeys of faith, we hope to be more like the church in Acts as we grow in our trust in God. As we begin today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

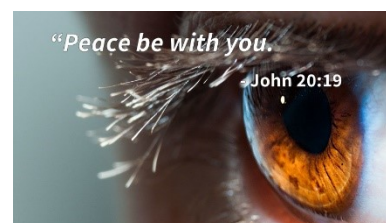
As we begin today, I invite you to consider the sunflower. The sunflower is probably the most amazing flowers God created. They literally follow the sun. Now I don't know about you, but one the most amazing things I have seen is a field of sunflowers. While watching one sunflower follow the sun through is kind of cute, watching hundreds in absolute unison follow the sun is actually quite incredible. (*Show video – 2:05*)



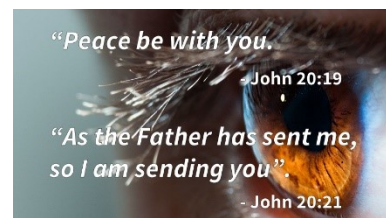
Did you know that sunflowers continue tracking the sun's direction long after sun set? During a 24-hour period, each sunflower turns a complete 360 degrees. They do

so to ensure that they are always oriented in the direction of the sun, even when it has gone down past the horizon. A whole field of sunflowers turns in unison as they track the sun 24-7. Their unity is totally dependent on one thing: their relationship to the sun. Imagine if our unity to the Son of God was like this, totally dependent on Jesus? More often than not, we are like Thomas, the central character in our first passage today. Turn with me to John 20 as we explore the idea of seeing without believing.

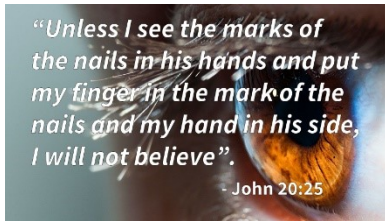
On the day of the resurrection, Jesus' disciples were gathered behind locked doors. They were afraid of what might happen to them. They feared the Jewish religious leaders who had just orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus. We read that in the evening, Jesus came and stood among them. The first words that Jesus speaks to the disciples is "*Peace be with you*". After the tumult and tragedy of Good Friday and the despair and brokenness of Holy Saturday, peace is probably something the disciples could use a good dose of. "*Peace be with you*".



Jesus then shows the disciples his hands and his side. We see their response in verse 20: *"Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord"*. It is interesting that these ten disciples believed and rejoiced only after they saw the physical marks of the crucifixion. For them, seeing led to believing. Once they have professed faith in the risen Christ, Jesus gives them their marching orders. In verse 21 Jesus says, *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you"*. Commissioned to go forth to share the good news with the world, Jesus then empowers them to do so. Breathing on them, Jesus says, *"Receive the Holy Spirit"*. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus extends the gift of forgiveness of sins to the disciples. Just as Jesus had forgiven sins, the disciples will be empowered with this same gift.



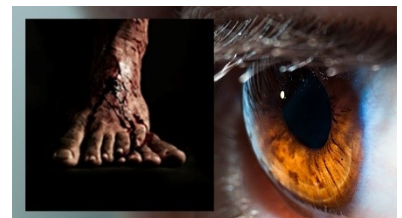
In verse 24 we learn that Thomas was not there when Jesus first appeared to the disciples. Upon hearing that Jesus came and visited the others, Thomas said to them, *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe"*. Thomas has since been known as "Doubting Thomas", but would we really be any different? Having followed this renegade rabbi, this subversive prophet for three years, placing all his hopes and dreams in Jesus, then to have him cruelly killed – well, maybe Jesus was not quite who Thomas thought he was. Maybe Jesus was just a little better than the frequent so-called Messiahs who came along every few years, promising to free Israel from the Romans. After all, Jesus ended up just like all those others – hanging on a cross, movement left dead in the water, the Romans still in control. Thomas is cautious. He does not want to get his hopes up again – especially with such an outlandish claim: resurrected from the dead! Hah!



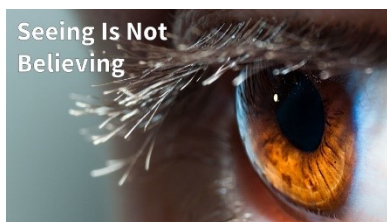
*"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe".* Thomas is sincere in his desire

to see the risen Jesus. He just needs proof. Thomas needs to see the physical proof. He is not quite willing to believe these wild reports. One week later, still behind locked doors, but with Thomas present, Jesus appears again to the disciples. Again, Jesus says, *"Peace be with you"*. Then he addresses Thomas. Just as Jesus had done with Peter when he forgave the denials, Jesus meets Thomas where he is at. It is really a beautiful thing here. Jesus offers Thomas the physical proof that Thomas needed. Jesus invites Thomas to touch the nail holes, to feel the gash in his side. Draw close and see that it is really me. Thomas immediately answers, *"My Lord and my God"*! Belief comes to Thomas too. Jesus met him where he was at and gave him what he needed. Jesus resurrected was no different than Jesus was when he was alive.

I know that Jesus offers the same to us – to give us what we need. Even so, as I consider what a blessing it was for the disciples to see Jesus, I realize that there are times when I could not look at Jesus standing before me. In those times when I am doubting, when I am upset with God about some little thing, when I am struggling with a sin... I can't but help and wonder, could I even look at him? Knowing my sin lead him to the cross, could I look Jesus in the eye? In a moment of reflection, I realized something. If I could not look at him, if my gaze fell to the ground as Jesus came to me in my time of need, there would be his feet. They too bear the scars. They too would remind me of the fact that he died for me, for my sins. They too would remind me of his love.



Scholars generally agree that the conversation ended with Thomas' proclamation of Jesus as Lord, with Thomas once again believing in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. To me, verse 29 does not really sound like something Jesus would say. Scholars believe that John added these words himself, speaking words of encouragement to future generations of Christians who would never have the chance to see the resurrected Jesus. So, for today, we leave it here too.

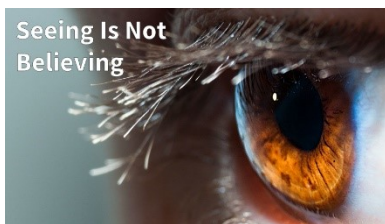
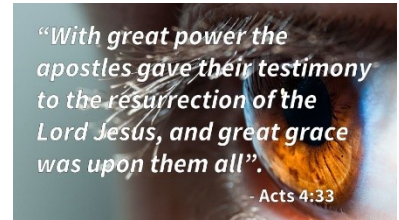


Turn with me to Acts 4, beginning in verse 32. The disciples have taken up Jesus' commission, being sent into the world to proclaim the good news.

The church has begun to grow and gain traction in society. New believers are becoming a part of the community of faith almost daily. There is great unity around following the humble and sacrificial example set by Jesus Christ himself. In verse 32 we read that the community of faith was *"of one heart and soul"*. They were so unified that individuals sold homes and land to support the work of the church and the apostles. We read that *"it was distributed to each as any had need"*. Their love extended outside of the "church" too. They cared for orphans and widows, the sick and the outcast, the marginalized and the lonely. Those outside the church began noticing the ways that these Christians were loving on their neighbors and were serving those in need in the various communities. The early church in Acts was living out the song "They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love". The world around the early church was seeing how their faith was leading them to live highly questionable lives, to use terminology from our Lenten study.



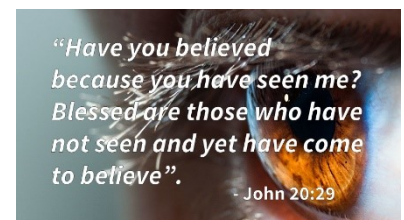
But seeing the church in action did not lead people to belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is not something that you can touch or physically see, like Thomas did with the scars on Jesus' resurrected body. Faith comes through knowing Jesus and his teachings. In verse 33 we read, *"With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all"*. The apostles told the story of Jesus. They told the stories of what Jesus had done and of how he had changed their lives. They told the story of how Jesus living inside them was leading them to love on the least and the lost, the broken and downtrodden, the outcast and the forgotten. The apostle's teachings and the witness of the believers' lives helped others to believe in the power of Jesus Christ to change their lives too.



Faith for those who became a part of the early church came not from seeing Jesus himself but from experiencing the impact that his living presence within

each of his followers was having upon their lives. Our faith is similar. Our faith is not based upon on a singular fact in history – the fact that Jesus was resurrected on the third day. Our faith is formed and lived out when we allow Jesus to rise within our hearts and lives as we seek to embody his example of self-sacrificial love in the world.

In John 20, verse 29, we read these words attributed to Jesus: *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"*. Thomas required sight and touch.

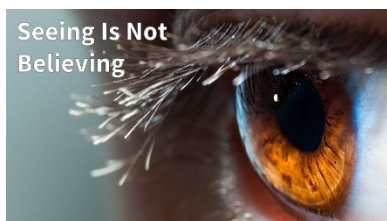


Blessed are those who believe without seeing. Generation after generation, for the last two thousand years, have come to believe without seeing the risen Christ. We stand in that long line of faithful disciples.

The reality is that when people see our faith being lived out – like when we offer a blessing to another, for example – this act of kindness does not often lead to that other person coming to faith. Seeing faith in action is much different than having one's own faith, right? Yet seeing faith in action prompts one to ask what is different about us. But to even wrap one's brain around the idea that Christians follow a man who was resurrected from the dead and lives eternally – that is a stretch for many non-believers.



This thought has led me to wrestle with this question this week: Is it really necessary to first believe in the resurrection to begin a walk of faith? Yes, it is truth and, yes, it is an important part of the overall story of faith. But I do not believe that very many people come to faith simply because they believe that Jesus was resurrected. I believe that this fact is something people come to understand after they have begun to pursue a relationship with Jesus.



When we live our lives in a way that others notice, when we love on our neighbors and the strangers among us the way that the early church in Acts did, then others begin to be curious about our lifestyle and eventually they are drawn towards Jesus. Seeing is not believing. Yet one must experience the love of Jesus in real and practical ways before seeds of faith begin to take root in lost and broken



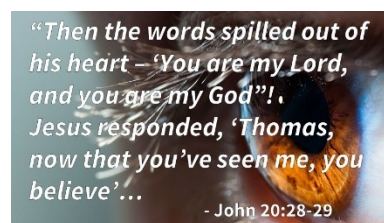
lives. Experiencing the love of Jesus is how people begin to see and then know about Jesus. For many of us this seeing or knowing happened in Sunday school or youth group or in our homes as our parents or grandparents modeled faith. And then at some point, we began to have those seeds of faith grow in our hearts. Those seeds eventually led to us believing in Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. That eighteen-inch journey from head to heart, from seeing to believing, can be a long journey but it is a journey all believers must take.

That what happened to Thomas as he recognized Jesus in his heart. Here is verses 28 and 29 from John 20 again, this time in the wording of the Passion translation: *"Then the words spilled out of his heart —*

*'You are my Lord, and you are my God'! Jesus responded, 'Thomas, now that you've seen me, you believe. But there are those who have never seen me*

*with their eyes but have believed in me with their hearts, and they will be*

*blessed even more'!"* Oh, for the words of faith to spill out of our hearts. We have been blessed. It is my hope and prayer that words of faith spill out of our hearts, opening others to the blessing of knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior.



As I close, I invite you to recall the path of the sunflowers. Each and every day, the sunflower follows the path of the sun 24-7. All of its life and energy go

into following the sun. The sun brings energy and life to the plant. The sun helps the plant to grow and become stronger. The sun helps the plant to one day produce "fruit". The same is true of the path of the disciple.



The more we follow Jesus, the more we track his path and his example, the stronger our faith and our witness to the world becomes. The more we live out the example of Jesus' self-sacrificial love, the more the world becomes the kingdom here on earth. As we go forth into the world this week, may we seek to model Jesus to the world. May the words of faith spill out of our hearts, drawing others into the story of faith. And if anyone asks, may we be prepared to tell the story of what Jesus has done for us. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As you think back over your faith journey, how have you experienced seeing a faith in others that has led to more belief for you?
- 2) *Pray*. How can you better allow others to see Jesus in you, leading them to be curious and to ask questions? Pray for Holy Spirit guidance!
- 3) *Study*. Read John 21: 20-25. What stands out to you in this passage? What do you make of verse 25?