

Easter Sunday
“Believing Is Seeing”
John 20:1-10

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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The 20th chapter is the climax of John’s gospel. It is HERE that the disciples first experience the risen Christ and see his glory, HERE where the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon them and they are then sent out into the world, and of course, it is HERE where Thomas makes his amazing confession of faith, “My Lord and my God!” Our account opens at the empty tomb with the discovery by Mary Magdalene that Jesus’ body has been moved. Without looking inside, she immediately runs to tell Simon Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” one whom most scholars assume is the disciple John. Upon hearing the news, Peter and John race to the tomb as fast as they can with John arriving ahead of Peter. We’re told that he looks in and sees the linen cloths lying there but does not enter it. Instead, he waits outside the tomb until Peter shows up. When Peter arrives, he enters the tomb AT ONCE where he too sees the linen cloths including the cloth that had been around Jesus’ head rolled up by itself. Only THEN does John go in. Upon seeing the empty tomb and the folded wrappings, it says he believes. Just WHAT he believes, we’re not told although we are informed that they still did not understand the scripture which said that he must rise from the dead. Then they leave the tomb and return home.

Now there are a myriad of opinions as to why John pauses before entering the tomb. Some believe it is out of respect for Peter’s age and his status as the head disciple. Others theorize that because John is so young, he is afraid and so he must wait for the more manly, the more courageous Simon Peter to go in first. I have a much different interpretation regarding John’s hesitancy- I believe it wasn’t necessary for John to go in and check for himself FOR HE ALREADY KNEW JESUS WASN’T INSIDE. He sees the stone rolled away from the front and after peering inside and noticing how neatly the grave clothes are folded, he INSTINCTIVELY perceives that the body of Jesus is gone and FOR GOOD REASON- he is SURE THAT HE’S ALIVE AGAIN. After three and a half years of close companionship with Jesus, watching him perform healing after healing, miracle after miracle, including witnessing with his own eyes the raising of Lazarus from his OWN tomb only the week before, he knew what Peter himself could not yet grasp- THAT THEIR LORD MUST HAVE BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD!

Thus John is not only the FIRST to the tomb, but the FIRST to believe that the Lord had left the grave clothes behind as a sign that he was alive again, and FURTHER, that he was the first of the disciples to believe WITHOUT ACTUALLY HAVING SEEN THE RISEN CHRIST. All the other disciples came to faith in the resurrection only AFTER having had a vision or encounter with Jesus in his resurrected state; they see him and THEN believe. JOHN, however, is the ONLY ONE who arrives at that same conviction but WITHOUT having seen Jesus alive FIRST. Yet even HIS belief was imperfect as neither he nor Peter had as yet understood that the resurrection of Jesus was the fulfillment of what had been prophesied in scripture. Where he may have had an intuition that Jesus was alive, as yet he still had no understanding of the SIGNIFICANCE of that event, that Christ was the Lamb of God who by his death took upon himself the sins of the world and thus it was necessary for him TO die. That understanding would come shortly.

Now the gospel of John is a story first and foremost about FAITH- I like to think of it as an instructional booklet for the Early Church on “how to believe.” Upon Thomas’ confession of faith, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus replies, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have NOT seen and YET BELIEVE.” Then in the next two verses, he explained the purpose for which the gospel was written, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”(vv.30-31) John presents a journey for the readers’ minds and the hearts as they travel from unbelief to full faith in the risen Lord. In this way, they remind LATER generations of believers that they TOO have a journey to make which will enable THEM to share the SAME experience as those who actually knew Jesus.

In John 20, the first stage of resurrection faith is what I would call “recognition” faith. That was the disciples’ INITIAL response to Jesus’ resurrection- the joy and the amazement they felt when after he appeared to them and they discovered he was NOT dead but ALIVE once again! This is the faith of John when he realizes that Jesus is no longer in the tomb but must be alive somewhere. It is the initial faith demonstrated by Mary Magdalene when he appeared to her beside the garden tomb after he had called her by name. It was the faith of the disciples when he appeared in their midst in the Upper Room where the doors and windows had been locked for fear of the Jews. In each of these cases, after they had overcome their amazement, it was then thought that they could once again resume their old lives along with their old routines with Jesus at their head as if with his reappearance nothing had changed. They did not yet understand that with his resurrection, EVERYTHING had changed, that he was now no longer their TEACHER AND GUIDE but rather their “LORD AND THEIR GOD.” They did not know that by his voluntary death on that cross, he had absorbed in his body not only THEIR sins, but the sins of the ENTIRE WORLD, and in the process had displayed the unconditional love of God for everyone to see.

It wasn’t until he and the rest of the disciples had encountered the Risen Christ PERSONALLY that Jesus could then take on this GREATER significance in their lives. Only THEN did they receive the Holy Spirit which was the personal presence of Jesus Christ in their lives; only THEN could they receive the Great Commission authorizing them to go out into the highways and byways, speaking in his name and winning the world for him and his kingdom. In fact, one of the conditions for being an Apostle as laid down by the Early Church was that the individual had to have PERSONALLY WITNESSED THE RESURRECTED CHRIST, having seen him with his own eyes.

Likewise, being a Christian must mean MORE than having one’s name on the church rolls, more than possessing a thorough knowledge of her creeds and doctrines. Rather, it is a requirement that we have a SAVING KNOWLEDGE of Jesus Christ and that can ONLY come from a PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE RISEN CHRIST THROUGH HIS HOLY SPIRIT. When John uses the word “faith” in his gospel, it never refers to knowledge “about” God but rather A RELATIONSHIP ON THE MOST INTIMATE LEVEL between two beings. Such faith involves the whole person—mind, body, emotions and all the rest—in a one-on-one relationship, and so unless our lives are united with the RISEN Christ, only THEN can it be said that we know him and ever be of any service to him.

But then there is a second, more MATURE stage of faith that John wants to move us all towards, and that is to believe in the faithful, active, and dynamic presence of the living Lord despite NOT having seen him personally as those early disciples did. One of the key concerns of this gospel as well of the early church was the faith of those who would come after those original disciples. How could they follow Christ and obey him with the same ardor and passion and faith even though they will have never seen him personally as those FIRST followers had. To be a “second or third generation” Christian is not an easy thing, and the further removed you get from the original experience, the HARDER YET it is to believe. To trust the testimony of those who have gone before you, ESPECIALLY after that testimony gets to be over two thousand years old, takes quite a bit of credulity!

The answer that Jesus provides lies in the promise of his Holy Spirit. He constantly told his disciples that the time would come when he would have to leave them, but then he reassured them that he would not leave them comfortless for he would STILL be present to them, though not in bodily form but in a SPIRITUAL one. This has the advantage of allowing them to live in an even more INTIMATE manner than they had previously enjoyed with him. He would no longer be at their side as he had been for the previous three and a half years, but would take up residence WITHIN them where he would make their heart his new home. They would then experience a sense of his personal presence and power they never before had known and essentially do the things HE had done while HE had been in the flesh with them.

Now like many of YOU, I grew up in the church where I was baptized, confirmed, and sat through years of worship services, Sunday School classes, and youth group meetings. Taken together, it provided me with a basic knowledge of who Jesus was and his central teachings. I learned about the unique circumstances regarding his birth and of the various characters he had encountered during his ministry. It was the church who taught me how Christ’s life culminated with his death on a cross and his subsequent resurrection from a tomb three days later. Since that initial event two thousand years ago, this body of knowledge which is reflected in our hymns and doctrines and creeds has been faithfully passed down from one generation to the next right up to the present day.

But there came a time when I learned that all this FACTUAL OR OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE about Jesus Christ was never intended to serve as a substitute for a PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST HIMSELF, that all those years of instruction and training I had received at the knee of my pastor and Sunday School teachers were not the GOAL or END of my Christian education but were actually the BEGINNING. They were intended to prepare me for having a more INTIMATE and SUBJECTIVE understanding of our Lord and his mission- one rooted in and based upon an experience of him in my OWN life. Just as all the education and training those disciples received from Jesus during their time together was preparing them to eventually receive him into their hearts and life through the gift of his Holy Spirit, so have our OWN years in the church served to prepare US for that VERY SAME PURPOSE. There comes a time when we have to graduate from a Sunday School knowledge of Jesus to a life-transforming, experience-based awareness of him as our Lord and Savior, and only THEN will he and his message become MORE than a topic of conversation on Sunday mornings but a living, dynamic power that remains constantly operative deep within us and for the rest of our lives. This is the resurrected presence of Jesus Christ at work IN US and THROUGH US via his Holy Spirit. It is the same dynamic force which transformed that group of cowering disciples who had locked themselves up in the Upper Room “for fear of the Jews” to suddenly become

those who were “turning the world upside down” as they were later described in the Book of Acts. The power that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is no less the active and on-going presence of JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF when we invite him into our heart to transform it into his new and permanent residence. The Apostle Paul understood this acutely for as he told the Christians in Galatia, “If there is any good I do or anything good about me, what you see is NOT ME but rather JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF at work WITHIN ME.”

I realized the power of Christ’s resurrection for my life almost a half century ago, and throughout that time, my message has remained consistent- to preach and teach the supremacy of his resurrection for our lives, the church, and for the world. It has been the basis now for all the “good news” proclaimed by the church for the past two millennia. When God raised Jesus from the grave, it was the Father declaring to the world that a new era was dawning in human history- one had come who would break the old cycles of sin and violence that had for too long turned his creation against itself and made us enemies among ourselves and to one another. His presence would interject a new spirit of solidarity into human relations that would no less begin to transform the structures of society, rendering our world a more peaceable and just place until that day when our Lord promises to return in power and glory.

Speaking honestly, I find that believing in a resurrected Christ who now makes our OWN life his new home has never been easy. I can readily subscribe to his crucifixion because crucifixion was a common method for dealing with rebels in ancient times and death is something all of us have seen and must no less experience ourselves some day- but which one of us has ever witnessed a dead person come back to life! A miracle can always be explained away. Can we even believe the reliability of the gospel accounts, trusting that no error has crept into the church’s tradition. How can we even be sure that there IS a Jesus we can talk to- one whom as we like to sing “walks with us and talks with us and tells us that we are his own?” Perhaps it has all been nothing but “wishful thinking” on our part! The bottom line is this: It’s one thing to BELIEVE that God loves you but QUITE ANOTHER thing to actually FEEL his love; it’s one thing to BELIEVE he’s present with you but it’s another to actually EXPERIENCE his presence. That’s PRECISELY the point of John’s gospel- as important as it is to hear the “good news” of God’s love through Jesus Christ and to believe that it’s all true, it’s only after we’ve FELT God’s love and EXPERIENCED his personal presence through his Holy Spirit that REAL change begins and we can never be the same person we once were or see the world the same way again.

Now earlier in my sermon, I pointed out how at the very end of his gospel, John informs the reader of his reason for writing this book- that we may believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, and by BELIEVING we may have life in his name. I also said that this is the SAME journey EACH OF US must make, one in which we travel from unbelief to full faith in the risen Lord. But this begs perhaps the MOST IMPORTANT question of ALL: How DOES one believe? How do we come to not just a HEAD understanding of who Jesus is but a HEART knowledge of him AS WELL? How can we be certain of not only WHO this person is but that he now makes our heart his HOME and by doing so, now claims our TOTAL ALLEGIANCE?

When such qualms and queries arise in my OWN mind, I find myself returning once again to the Gospels, to those biblical narratives that tell us everything we need to know about him. I begin by first looking at the MAN Jesus, the person presented to us in all his simplicity there. I look at his life, his extraordinary compassion for the lost and lonely, for the poor and dispossessed. I see how he never turned a single person away REGARDLESS of age, sex, or

affliction but found ways to minister to them always at the point of their deepest need. I reflect upon his words, his promises, and come away convinced as those officers were when they told the chief priests and Pharisees, “No man ever spoke like this man!” I am especially moved by the love and humility he demonstrated in the hour of his death, offering words of pardon and forgiveness to his executioners, granting citizenship in his kingdom to one of the thieves crucified beside him, and caring for his mother and the beloved disciple in his last act before dying. I am not thinking of what category to fit him into, whether he is human or divine. I just find myself drawn to him, compelled by him and the example he set. By his death and words of forgiveness, I become conscious of pardon and reconciliation which I find in no other person.

James writes “Draw near to God and he will draw near to YOU.” Thus, the closer I come to him, the more I sense a transformation take place within me. I start to feel like a new person, feel like I want to live like him and follow him wherever he would lead me. As a result, by slow degrees, I find that this man Jesus has the value of God for me, how if any person EVER represented God in the flesh, HE is it. In contact with him, I am able to touch God, and through him, I discover that God is holy, pardoning Love. Therefore, on the basis of what he is and what he has done, I accord him that unique name that is above every other name in heaven or on earth. Because through him, I find God and experience reconciliation, I therefore am persuaded he is the “God-man,” the mediator between God and his struggling humanity.

Some years ago, *The Wall St. Journal* published a full-page interview with Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a founder and leader of the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas. The interview was startling, not because as the son of a terrorist leader, he was there to promote propaganda for Hamas but because he WASN'T. Rather, he described how he had turned against it thereby becoming a traitor to the organization and a shame to his family. He had had enough of all the indiscriminate violence that continued to achieve nothing for his people. He had witnessed how politicians were willing to climb “on the shoulders of poor, religious people.” He says Palestinians who heeded the call “were going like a cow to the slaughterhouse, and they thought they were going to heaven.” As a result, at the age of twenty-two, he became a spy for Israel to infiltrate Hamas's military and political network.

But what had to be the hardest revelation for his family was his conversion from Islam to Christianity. He now wants both Palestinians and Israelis to learn what HE did from a loving, gracious, merciful God embodied in the peace of Christ. HOW DID THAT HAPPEN? He says:

“I converted to Christianity because I was convinced by Jesus as a character, as a personality. I loved him, his wisdom, his love, his unconditional love. I didn't leave the Islamic religion to put myself in another box of religion. At the same time it's a beautiful thing to see my God exist in my life and see the change in my life. I see that when he does exist in other Middle Easterners there will be a change.”

Friends, can you see what happened in his life. He didn't first begin with the affirmation that Jesus was divine, that he was the Son of God who had taken away his sins as a pre-condition to first becoming a Christian. No, it was an organic process that began when he first focused on the man, the character, and the personality of Christ himself. It was THAT which had won him over- the love, the purity, the unconditionality demonstrated by the ONE who caused him to eventually get down on his knees and declare of him, “My Lord and my God!”

Likewise, MY journey of faith did not begin by first repeating the church's creeds and affirming that Jesus was divine like the church says he is. Such a belief DOES not and CAN not save. Rather, I approached him as a man and, through his extraordinary humanity, I THEN came to the conviction that he had divinity in him. I simply allowed my mind and heart and conscience to confront him AS HE IS with the result that I was unable to resist him for long. Hence, he compels me as no other person ever has or ever WILL. Drawn into SYMPATHY with him and then OBEDIENCE to him, I soon found myself surrendering to the very same impulse that caused Doubting Thomas to suddenly exclaim, "My Lord, and my God!" That remains MY journey of faith--the same journey of belief that was taken by John and Peter and the REST of those early disciples--and amidst all your OWN trials and questionings, may it become YOUR journey as well. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, on this glorious Easter morning, help us to not only know you and love you as the wise teacher and compassionate healer and the accepter of all persons everywhere, but may we ALSO know and love you as the Risen Savior who conquered death once and for all in order to reconcile a broken world to thine own benevolent care. In your Son's blessed name we pray. Amen.