

The Power of Vision

John 20:19-31

Can I say that Thomas is my favorite disciple? It is not as if I actually have a feeling about each of the twelve. And what does “favorite” mean, anyway? My favorite baseball player of all time is Johnny Bench; basketball player, Quinn Buckner; football, Peyton Manning. (I know, I should probably say John Riggins, but he may not even make my top ten.) When my brothers and I were boys we collected trading cards for every major sport, swapping them and arguing passionately over which players were better. I still carry a load of bitterness that my brother Tim talked me into giving him my extra Tony Perez, plus a Tom Seaver, for Johnny Bench's 1977 all-star card.

But I do appreciate Thomas. He asked the questions I would ask, *if* I had the moxie. When told others had seen the risen Jesus he said he would believe it when he saw it. Ah, the power of vision. Not of the “vision thing” as President Bush the Elder put it, of having a comprehensive picture of how things ought to be; but of laying our own eyes on something, of seeing for ourselves. I firmly believe one of the most frightful things about the Covid 19 virus is that we cannot see it. Does that grocery cart handle have viral particles on it? Did that person just sneeze it in my direction? We do not know. We cannot see it. Thomas could not believe reports of Jesus' resurrection until he saw his Master for himself. But when he did, he immediately confessed his faith in Jesus as “my Lord and my God”. As we shall see, this

confession **mattered**.

A man in a Bible study once told me this episode irritated him. He felt Jesus let Thomas off the hook too easily. Jesus did ask one question: “Have you believed because you have seen me?” We understand this question has a prickly tone because he followed it with, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe!” But the man in the Bible study wished Jesus had said something more along the lines of, “For years I have told you to believe in me. I have predicted my death and my return from death. Why did you insist on seeing me for yourself? Why did you not believe?”

In the close of this passage John the Gospel writer added weight to the importance of faith, of believing **without** seeing. He wrote, “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.” By “these” he means accounts of Jesus' words and deeds, specifically his “signs”, his miracles, his revelations of power. He wrote his Gospel in order to move its readers to believe in Jesus as the Savior without having seen him for themselves. Those readers include you and me. Not having seen Jesus with your own eyes, not having placed your hand on his wounded side and hands, do you believe in him as your Savior?

It **is** a challenge to believe when we have not seen. We cannot fully understand how people in Jesus' day and time would have responded to him. We cannot climb

into their heads. We do not speak their language. But we might say with confidence that we face the greater challenge when it comes to faith. We have the “benefit” of centuries of scientific discovery. So many things thought to be miraculous, or capricious, or malicious have been explained. And with our knowledge comes a certain skepticism about the spiritual world. We know viruses and bacteria cause disease, which the ancients thought was caused by sin, or by an angry God. We cannot see the virus with our own eyes but can with our electron microscopes. We cannot see the Spirit of God with either.

Thanks be to God that we have already been given what we need to believe in the resurrected power of Jesus. John the Gospel writer slips the answer into the middle of this passage: “When (Jesus) had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit...’” This verse seems out of place, an odd interlude in the story of Thomas and faith. In fact, the German School of Bible scholars decided John originally put it at the very end of his Gospel, meaning it to be the final word, and therefore an important message. Regardless of where it first appeared, it does contain a point we absolutely need to hear today. (As our virtual worship format calls for me to preach shorter sermons I must pass for today on addressing the additional question it also raises, the part about us forgiving and “retaining” sins.)

But the gift of the Holy Spirit matters a great deal—to Jesus' disciples then and to all his followers since. Including us. John said Jesus breathed on his disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit. Hebrew uses one word for spirit, wind and breath. I believe

that Jesus, aware of this, intentionally created a kind of visual parable, acting out his point, that he would always be present in his followers, that his Spirit would inhabit them, animate them, calm them, direct them. We need not have been standing there when Jesus blew his invisible Spirit on his physical followers in order to receive that Spirit ourselves. We receive it when we confess our faith in Him.

In these difficult days, when an invisible enemy stalks us, we can receive the peace of Christ when we have faith in Him. We can find our guidance from that Spirit as we make all those hard choices now facing us: do I go to the hardware store? When should we worship together at church again? How shall I respond to an angry person who disagrees with the choices our leaders make, or with the choices I make? And that same Spirit can give us confidence that no matter what happens, in life and in death we belong to Jesus. Confess your faith in Jesus. Receive the Holy Spirit. Find peace, guidance and hope. Now, more than ever.