

Easter 2B 2021 Sermon

John 20:19-31

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." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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."

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." 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 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."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.

Have you ever seen God?

Has *anyone* ever **seen** God?

At first, the answer appears to be easy: **No one** has ever *seen* God. But if we look at the Old Testament, that answer doesn't always hold true. In the Book of Exodus, for instance, God tells Moses, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." (Ex. 33:20) And yet, earlier in the *same* chapter of Exodus, we read, "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." (Ex. 33:11)

And, in the Book of Genesis, we read that *Jacob*, after wrestling all night with an unidentified "man," "named that place Peniel [which means "Face of God"] – because, Jacob said, "I have **seen** God face to face, and have survived." (Genesis 32:30)

Things don't get much clearer when we come to the *New Testament*. In the First Chapter of John's Gospel, we read, "No one has ever seen God. *But* the one and only Son is himself God and... He has **revealed** God to us." (John 1:18, NLT2)

So... we don't *see* God; but the Son, who **is** God, *reveals* God to us? Curiouser and curiouser.

Then, *later* in John's Gospel, Jesus' disciple Philip says to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." And Jesus responds, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:8-9) So... those who saw Jesus *in the flesh*, saw God?

When we come to the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, it doesn't get much clearer. The risen Christ appears to Mary Magdalene, and at first, she doesn't recognize him; she thinks he's the gardener. (John 20:11-18) The risen Christ appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and, at first, the disciples don't recognize him. (Luke 24:13-35) The risen Christ apparently has *some* semblance of **physicality**; but his outer appearance also seems *somehow* to be different – unrecognizable, at first, to those who knew him so well during his earthly life.

In today's Gospel, the disciples are huddled together in a locked room, and the risen Christ just appears among them. Dr. John Shea writes: "This strongly suggests that the disciples have a *spiritual* realization of the presence of Jesus. He does not appear as an outer form as he previously did, but he manifests himself as a presence emerging from within and allaying their inner panic. His presence is known by the fact he brings peace in the midst of fear."¹ His presence is known by the fact he brings peace in the midst of fear.

The summer after my Junior Year in College, my college roommate and I enrolled in a 6-week course in Spanish history, language, and culture. The course would be taught in Madrid, Spain; and my roommate and I would be roommates in a Madrid apartment. It would turn out to be life-changing for me.

To make a long story short, late one sweltering July night when we were in our rented room in Madrid, I had what might be described as a nervous breakdown. The foundations of my carefully constructed and protected ego were crumbling beneath me, and I was in a state of abject fear. My roommate, a psychology major, implored me to look inside myself and try to identify what was at the root of my fear.

Now, I had never before looked inside myself in any depth whatsoever; but I was willing to grasp at any lifeline that was thrown to me at that moment. So I looked deep into my fear; and what met me there was overpowering in its force and clear in its Truth. Physically shaking, I said to my roommate: "I am afraid of losing control." And no sooner had I spoken those words than suddenly, I felt this cold breeze blow in through the window, in the midst of the sweltering Madrid heat. I felt a lump in my throat; and I couldn't speak. I literally, physically, could not speak. I felt cold; but at the same time, I felt this incredible sense of peace which, somehow, I *knew* was from God.

“His presence is known by the fact he brings peace in the midst of fear.”

Now, this was all happening inside of me; but, at the same time, there was some unseen, manifest presence in that room. For, after a few moments, my roommate said to me, “I feel cold, for some reason.” It wasn’t just coming from inside me: there was something real, un-seeable, and holy in that room.

This past week, I read an article titled, “Actually, Science Says You Have Way More Than 5 Senses.”² Another article I saw listed 18 senses that humans have.³ Proprioception, for example, is the ability to tell where your body parts are, relative to other body parts. Proprioception allows us, for instance, to touch our finger to our nose when our eyes are closed. “Vestibular perception” helps us keep our balance. “Chronoception” allows us to sense the passage of time. “Interoception” is the ability to sense your own heartbeat (without taking your pulse) and sense other inner bodily workings. Research shows that about 10 percent of people have innately strong interoception, and can easily sense their heart beating – even when at rest.

My friends, though scientists would never be able to prove it, I believe that we also have an innate sense of the presence, the love, and the outflowing Life of God. Call it “Theo-ception,” “God-sense,” or whatever. It is what Moses experienced when he encountered the burning bush; what Jacob experienced after wrestling all night long; what the disciples experience in today’s Gospel story; what I experienced in that rented Madrid apartment; what many of us experience when we are present in this holy place on Sunday mornings; and yes, it is also what some people experience when worshiping online. A **sense** of the presence, the love, the forgiveness, the outpouring Life of God.

My bone doctor constantly reminds me to do my balance exercises, in order to improve my vestibular perception – my sense of balance (which naturally deteriorates as we age). But it’s not only our sense of balance that can be improved with exercise: **all** of our senses can be improved, to *some* degree, with practice and use: *including* that sense which perceives the presence, love, forgiveness, and outpouring Life of God. God is *always* present; but **we** are so often totally unaware of, unconscious of, God’s presence, God’s love, God’s Life. And so, it benefits us to **practice** being aware of the presence, love, and outflowing Life of God.

Now, **each** of you is *already* practicing the presence of God simply by **being** here, whether in person or online. In today’s Gospel, the risen Christ is experienced while the community of disciples is gathered. Regularly coming together to worship – whether in person, or virtually – is a practice which can decrease the level of incessant mind-chatter and ego dominance that keep us from the awareness of God’s presence, love, and outflowing Life.

Thomas is not **with** the community of his fellow disciples that first Easter Sunday; so he doesn't see, doesn't experience the risen Christ. But the *next* Sunday, Thomas is back amongst the community of disciples; and when the risen Christ appears again in the midst of that gathered community, Thomas sees and believes.

My friends, there are many *other ways* – besides regularly meeting together (in person or virtually) on Sunday mornings – there are many other ways that we can exercise our “God sense” each day of the week. Spending time in silence, in nature, in prayer. Reading the Bible – especially the Gospels – or some other spiritual or devotional book. I encourage you, this coming week, to set aside some time each day to simply sit in silence, and see if you can sense God's presence. Sit comfortably in a chair, close your eyes, take a deep, slow breath, and then perhaps just say, “Here I am, God.” If your mind wanders, just go back to saying, “Here I am, God,” or simply, “I am here.” Try it for just one minute, to begin with. Thomas Keating said that Centering Prayer is our “intent to consent to the presence of God.” Our intent to consent to the presence of God.

In the weeks to come, in Sunday morning worship, we will occasionally engage in a short practice of “exercising our God-sense.” If you can't be **physically** present here in worship, you can still engage in these practices virtually, online.

Thomas thinks that he will not come to believe in the resurrected Christ unless he physical touches Christ's wounds. But when Christ does offer this opportunity to Thomas, he doesn't take it. He doesn't touch the wounds. Was he convinced because he saw with his physical eyes? Or did the risen Christ so strongly engage Thomas' “God-sense” that nothing more was needed? I tend to think it is the latter. For Thomas does not say, “OK, now I've seen it; I can believe.” Rather, he says, “My Lord and my God.”

AMEN

1 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 106

2 <https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/actually-science-says-you-have-way-more-than-5-senses.html>

3 “Humans have a lot more than five senses — here are 18”

<https://www.considerable.com/health/healthy-living/humans-five-senses/>