

Easter 2C 2019 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.

Before the dawn of the Renaissance in about the 14th Century, the mindset and awareness of most people on this planet included a strong belief in the reality of a spiritual realm. It was thought that people had 3 kinds of eyes: the eye of flesh, through which we “see” or perceive the world with our 5 senses; the eye of the mind, through which we reason; and the eye of the heart, through which the ever-present spiritual realm is perceived directly. St. Augustine in the 5th Century said that “the whole business in this life is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen.”¹ It’s not that, in the centuries following Augustine, a majority of Christians necessarily developed the ability to see with their eye of the heart – the ability to perceive *directly* this ever-present spiritual reality. But they never doubted that such a spiritual realm *existed*. They believed that we live in what Richard Rohr has called “an enchanted universe.”

Beginning with the Renaissance, however, and accelerating during “The Age of Enlightenment” in the 18th Century, belief in such a spiritual realm came to be considered ignorant superstition. The focus was turned almost totally on using the eye of the flesh (which was expanded with the invention of the telescope and microscope) and the eye of the mind. The Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes famously said, “I think, therefore I am,” making

thinking the very basis of being! By the time Thomas Jefferson came on the scene, he was taking a scissors and cutting out the parts of the New Testament that didn't make rational sense to him. In the early 20th Century, biblical scholars like Rudolf Bultmann set about "demythologizing" Scripture; and by the 1950's, mainline Christian scholars were doubting that Jesus really performed miracles. The 1960's brought the "God is Dead" movement.

Oh, Christianity was still a strong part of our American culture in the 1950's and early 60's, and when I was in grade school I assumed that all of my classmates attended *some* church – and that assumption wasn't too far off the mark. But the Christianity I learned and practiced consisted of going to church on Sundays, saying grace before meals and prayers before bed, and asking God for forgiveness for the bad things I did, and to *give* me the things I wanted. I had no clue that there was such a thing as a spiritual reality interpenetrating this world which I might have access to through an "eye of the heart:" some 6th sense that was built into my DNA but which I had not been taught to use.

Even in Jesus' day, a large part of the Jewish religion had been reduced to sets of rules and laws. That sixth sense, the ability to discern spiritual reality, the presence of God, the kingdom of God, the ability to see with the eye of the heart, was, for many in Jesus' day, unused, and therefore forgotten.

Which may be a big reason that **nobody** in the Gospels recognizes, at first, the risen Christ. They had not developed their ability to see spiritual reality; and the risen Lord **is** a *spiritual* being. As St. Paul says about the resurrection of the dead, "What is sown is a physical body, what is raised is a spiritual body." (1 Cor. 15:44)

On that first Easter Day, when night falls, the disciples (except for Thomas) are huddled behind locked doors out of fear of those who had handed Jesus over to be crucified. Yes, the disciples had heard the report from Mary Magdalene that that very morning she had seen the resurrected Jesus; though at first she did **not** recognize him, thinking he was the gardener. But the other disciples obviously didn't believe her. Yet now, in the evening of that first Easter Day, suddenly the resurrected Christ appears to **them** behind their locked doors. He shows them his hands and side, bearing the marks of crucifixion; and only **then** do they believe that it **is** the risen Christ.

Why **is** it that *nobody*, at first, recognizes the risen Christ? Perhaps it is because, while this is definitely the same Jesus whom they followed for three years, who bears the marks of his crucifixion, he is at the same time *different*. **This** Risen Christ can go through walls and locked doors, appear and disappear at will. This is the **spiritual** body Paul speaks about. There is something just different enough about the resurrected Christ that he isn't recognized at first by those who knew him best.

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright notes, “He comes and goes as though he belongs *both* in our world *and* in a different world, one which intersects with ours at various points but doesn’t use the same geography.”² A spiritual realm which most of us, most of the time, are unaware of.

David Lose believes that Thomas is not so much a *doubter* as he is a **realist**. “Thomas wasn’t with the other disciples when they were cowering in fear in the upper room,” Dr. Lose notes. “We don’t know where [Thomas] was, but I’m guessing he was out getting on with his life, figuring out what was going to come next and getting on with it. Because Thomas is, first and foremost, a realist.

“And... reality came like never before on that Friday [when Jesus was crucified]. Jesus was dead, and with him all the hopes and dreams of the past three years had perished as well.

“So when the disciples come saying that they had seen Jesus, Thomas... just plain doesn’t believe. And so I suspect that his demand to see and feel the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands is less a request for proof than it is *mocking* the [other] disciple’s claim. He *makes* that demand, in other words, because he **knows** it will never happen...

“Which leads me to believe that what changes when Thomas is confronted by the risen Lord is... his perception of reality itself. Of what is possible. Of what God can do...

“Jesus comes and takes [Thomas’] mocking words and turns them back on him, not to humiliate or scold him, but simply to confront him with the possibility that his reality was too small...”³

His reality was too small.

My friends, I know I am guilty, too. *My* reality, most of the time, is too small. All too often I live as though reality is only that which I can see, hear, taste, touch, smell, and think. As though reality is what I read in the news headlines, which always seem to paint a picture of a world gone **totally** amuck, with no possibility of redemption by and through a spiritual reality which is always present but which I do not see, because I have not engaged the eye of my heart.

And I suspect that I am not alone in this. Which is one reason – a **BIG** reason – that *we need each other*. We need to come together each week like those first disciples did, even in the midst of our fears and doubts, to remind one another that, in the words of N.T. Wright, “The resurrection is not an alien power breaking into God’s world,”² but that it reveals a deeper reality that has always been there; a spiritual reality.⁴ We do not *see* it because we are totally consumed by seeing with the eye of the flesh and the eye of the mind. We need to open up in ourselves and in one another the eye of the heart, that instrument of perception

created to see that **bigger** reality, the spiritual realm interpenetrating this physical realm. “We fix our eyes not on what is seen,” writes St. Paul, “but on what is unseen.” (2 Corinthians 4:18) Since the eyes of the flesh **cannot**, *by definition*, see what is unseen, Paul **must** be talking about a *different* set of eyes! If St. Augustine was right and “the whole business in this life is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen,” then we **need** to come together each week to hear Scripture read and preached, to sing and pray together, to be fed with the spiritual food of Christ’s body and blood. And in this world where the eye of the heart is all but forgotten, we need a regular, daily practice of prayer and a disciplined awareness of -- and openness to -- that **larger** reality which is always there, and which Thomas *finally* sees. For let’s face it, my friends, when someone says to you, “Get real!”, they mean, “Get your head out of the clouds, and focus on what can be seen, heard, smelled, touched, tasted; rationally proven.” “Get real!” in the mindset of our age means not to **expand** your reality, but to *contract* it. It means to be more like Thomas the realist.

What we forget is that what can be seen with the eye of the heart is every bit as “real” as what can be seen with the eye of the flesh or the eye of the mind. Why is it that we are *more* willing to believe in “dark matter,” which **nobody** has ever seen or proven, than in the reality of the Spiritual realm, which at least **some** people (and mystics and contemplatives) have *seen* with the eye of their heart, and *anyone* who has had any kind of “God experience” has at least glimpsed? “Part of what it means to come to church,” writes David Lose, “is to have our view of the world challenged with the possibility of *something more*.”³ That’s the same thing St. Augustine said 1500 years ago: that the reason we celebrate the sacraments, the reason we read the scriptures, indeed, “the whole purpose of this life, is to restore to health the eye of the heart whereby God may be seen.”

So ponder for a minute: Is your reality too small?

“You don’t have to surrender your realism,” writes David Lose; “rather, **expand** it to *include* that spiritual reality revealed so powerfully and clearly in Jesus’ death and resurrection.”³ Through daily disciplines of prayer and silence and intentional awareness, we can open, and train, the eye of our heart, so that we might see more often that spiritual reality which Thomas the realist sees at last.

AMEN

¹ Augustine, Sermon 38 on the New Testament

² Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (p. 154). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

³ (<http://www.davidlose.net/2015/04/easter-2-b/>)

⁴ For a fuller explanation of resurrection as inherent in Creation, see Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, Chapter 14: “The Resurrection Journey”