



“BELIEVING IS SEEING”
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 16; JOHN 20: 19-31
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
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It's a week past Easter, and Jesus' followers are hold up behind closed doors—locked doors.

Story goes that they were scared—afraid of “the Jews.”

Seems like they'd be afraid of the Roman officials—they are the ones who executed Jesus after all. But they were afraid of “the Jews” –so the story goes.

So, they closed the doors—they sought refuge, safety, protection—they closed the doors, and they locked them.

So who were “The Jews” anyway? For John—It's pretty much anyone who didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The Jews weren't an ethnic group, in other words, they were lumped together by belief—or in this case, a lack of belief.

So what were Jesus' followers afraid of? In their grief, in their disorientation from losing the man they had given up everything to follow, what had them locked up, hold up away from the world?

They had so much to try and make sense of back then—not that we don't today, too.

For centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection, the world was trying to make sense of what happened, to make sense of a post-Easter world.

There were other stories floating around back then and into the 2nd and 3rd centuries. And one of them professed to be about John, the Son of Zebedee, one of the first disciples Jesus called.

You know John, one of the brothers who said goodbye to their fishing nets and their dad and a pretty good fishing business, dropped everything to follow Jesus.

Legend had it that this John is the John portrayed in a gospel that didn't make it into the Bible—The “Secret Gospel of John”—also known as the Apocryphon of John.

So, the story goes that John was devastated when Jesus died—in the depths of his grief, a Pharisee came to him, a Jewish official, and chastised John for his foolishness.

“You abandoned your whole heritage, your family, your community, to follow this Nazarene, and now he is dead and he amounted to nothing. You look like a fool.”

John took this shaming so deeply to heart that he fled to the desert. And there he prayed fervently for God's help. And the Risen Christ appears to him in the desert and begins to tell him secrets of the universe.

Fear of persecution may not be all that kept those who had staked their lives on Jesus behind closed doors that week past Easter.

Fear of looking foolish, of embarrassment and shame can make us do some things we may not be proud of in hindsight—kind of a crazy twist on how self-destructive we humans can be sometimes—to avoid looking foolish, we abandon what we believe, when abandoning our beliefs is what will prove foolish in the end.

Maybe being rejected by our fellow humans feels more frightening in the moment than abandoning all that we had pinned our hopes on. But, I have a feeling it's more about our own insecurity, than it is about us choosing public acceptability over God.

Believing is a risk—and it's on us to take it or leave it, and to live with the world we're left to see.

So the church's early steps into their post-Resurrection world may have been a step in the wrong direction—a step toward fear, instead of a step toward faith.

Enter Thomas—the one often referred to in Christian circles as “Doubting Thomas.”

Funny how those labels get pinned on people—when everyone else around him did the same thing—he just happened to miss a meeting, that's all.

And another thing—the word “doubt” is not in this passage in the Aramaic or the Greek. The NIV and the NRSV translations got it wrong—and Thomas gets a reputation as the weak link, when really he makes the strongest profession of faith there is in the Gospel.

The word here is actually unbelieving, not doubt—and there's an important distinction to be made. The problem is not Thomas' skepticism, but his forgetfulness about what belief is really about.

Jesus is telling Thomas something utterly primal about being human: that believing is seeing. That is, what we believe, colors the world that we see. And what we believe will determine what we are able to see.

It's fine that Thomas wants to see—he just asked for the same thing everyone else got. Remember, Mary Magdalene had already told the disciples about Jesus'

resurrection, and they didn't take her word for it either. They were locked up in a room, afraid. That doesn't sound much like believing to me.

Jesus gives Thomas what he needs and then Jesus tells him—remember, believing is seeing when it comes to the life of faith, not the other way around—now open the doors and get out there and believe, for goodness sake.

Helen Keller was only 19 months old when she lost her sight and her hearing to some kind of fever.

Life was more and more frustrating for her—locked away from her world, unable to participate, communicate, unable to explain herself, her feelings. Rage became her mode of operation and by the age of 6 her everyday life was made up of a series of angry tantrums.

A few months shy of Helen's 7th birthday, Anne Sullivan, came to her home in Alabama to be her teacher. Sullivan persevered through Helen hitting, pinching, and kicking her—even knocking out some of her teeth. Helen didn't know how to believe in a world she could trust, much less how to believe in a world she could find life in or even find love.

Annie didn't give up on Helen, and she consistently gave her what she needed—a way to connect to the world that set her free from her isolation and frustration. It was water (font) that opened the world up to Helen. W-A-T-E-R, Annie finger-spelled into Helen's hands over and over again, and then she would pump the water from the spigot over Helen's hands.

“Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! ...Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. I did nothing but explore with my hands and learn the name of every object that I touched; and the more I handled things and learned their names and uses, the more joyous and confident grew my sense of kinship with the rest of the world.”

Annie eventually took Helen to Boston to the Perkins School for the Blind where she met other children who spelled with their fingers. “Oh, what happiness!” Helen wrote of this experience, “To talk freely with other children! To feel at home in the great world!”

Believing made the world something Helen could see anew—the world was home! In later years, Helen would refer to the day her teacher arrived in her life as “my soul’s birthday.”

God made us humans this way—as aspirational beings—able to see what we believe we will see, what we can see.

This is both our greatest strength, and our greatest weakness. Believing is seeing—and so we see what we believe we will see.

And so our unbelief can distort the world that looks back to us—into a place full of things to fear, full of things to hide from, to protect ourselves from, a place full of strangers and enemies.

The Psalmist sings to us of how the world changes when we see God at the center of it, when we place God before us in everything we do, when we believe ourselves to be utterly dependent on God and not simply dependent on our selves.

The Psalmist seeks refuge in the temple—is this sanctuary a place to hide?

The Psalmist seeks refuge in God—is this sanctuary a place where holy things come alive?

The Psalmist’s protection is God’s sovereignty, the Psalmist’s life-source is trusting God—is this sanctuary a place where God’s hopes and dreams for us capture our imagination?

When this sanctuary is not a hiding place, but a place where we practice trusting God, where we put God at the center of all we do and say and are together—then this sanctuary becomes Holy ground—a space of gladness and of trust, of bodies thriving, and of joy that is full!

When doors are closed, you can’t really feel joy in your fortress, because you have to constantly worry about guarding the doors, about who might find their way in that you do not want to see.

When the doors are open—they are a sign of our trust in God—that the world is not to be feared, it is to be loved—a love that frees, the breathes life into us. We can see a world that invites us to see God’s resurrection power all around us.

The antithesis of fear is not safety, it is joy!

How does the world open up for people who believe? What new things can we see when we anticipate God's love and justice and mercy to be showing their true colors all around us.

Reference to Immigration 101--not about charity or serving those in need, but opening ourselves up to believing that we meet God in relationships that truly stretch us beyond what we can see about ourselves right now. Building community, building relationships, in ways that truly heal the world.

Like Seed planting—an act of faith—so is every day we spend expecting to see God's fingerprints in our midst, in our relationships, in the things that are excruciatingly hard for us. When we believe the seed will grow we can recognize its earliest signs of coming to life and we can attend to what it needs to grow and to flourish.

Believing is seeing.

And sometimes we can confuse our sight for all there is to see.

Ten years ago when I realized parish ministry was not in the cards for me anymore—football families have to move too much and we had just moved to our 4th city in three years, I was challenged with a feeling of being alone I had never felt.

I wondered what my life had been all about—I wondered if I had been foolish to believe. I wondered what it meant that I had built my life on a whole way of doing things that I would no longer be a part of that way as I had thought I would.

It was hard for me to distinguish between my belief in God and my role in the church.

It was a time of mourning, a time of death. Things felt very heavy, and it was hard to see beyond what was right in front of me—which seemed like something I couldn't recognize at all.

Riding my horse, Traveler, was a refuge—a way to stay connected to life, a way to hang on, to not feel totally cut off. One day, heavy with unbelief, I was riding my Traveler through the woods and said out loud “is there really nothing out there?”

The woods seems to hush themselves and all I could hear was the sound of my horse's feet walking, and all I could feel was the rhythm of his steps and the swaying of our bodies moving on that path. And a wash of something moved through me—like breath, like wind, like Spirit. And the song of the birds caught my attention, and the wonder of the world drew my gaze. And the words came as if from an ancient place—not my own, but whispered to me again the language of belief—“Who do I think I am?” Were the words that I heard me say to myself.

Who do I think I am? To think my unbelief determines God's existence all of the sudden felt so very foolish of me. I realized my doubts, my struggles, did not threaten or diminish God's power—God would be God whether I chose to see God or not. My unbelief did not erase God's presence in the world, it just diminished my ability to see God in the world.

It was a resurrection moment—when I realized God's power was not dependent on my belief in it. But that my belief was my decision to trust God's power even when I could not see it.

Believing is seeing—seeing even that which we cannot yet see.

Do not unbelieve. Believe!

It's a week past Easter, brothers and sisters, and there's no time like the present to open our doors—these doors, the doors of our hearts, the doors of our minds, the doors of our very souls and remind ourselves what it means to believe in a wounded, resurrected God in our midst and to see the world accordingly.

Resurrection is about new eyes to see—and the courage to believe before we can see—a world healing and someday even healed, a world unfolding from fear and someday even free from fear, a world just beginning to bud and someday, in God's mystery and power, a world fully in bloom.

Thanks be to God.