

Meditation on John 20:29  
CCRC, 14 April 2024  
"Beyond Doubt"

Dear Friends of God,  
\*

If you're like me, you sometimes wish you could have been there to see Jesus. You wish that you could have walked beside him and heard his voice. You imagine yourself taking him by the shoulders and saying, "Now tell me straight, Jesus, are you the saviour of the world? Are you the Son of God?" And then Jesus would say, "Of course I am." And that would be it. You would never doubt again. You would always keep that moment fresh in your mind, rehearsing it over and over again.

How that experience with Jesus would calm your fears and ease your doubts. Somewhere inside of us there is this wistfulness, this simple wish: \* I want to see Jesus just like Thomas saw Jesus. If he's alive and well and living in heaven, I want him to show himself at least once to me. Especially when I'm in a hard place.

\*

The Beatles song My Sweet Lord, written and sung by George Harrison was released in 1970 and still has an abiding attraction. Harrison's yearning prayer, "I really want to know you, I really want to go with you. I really want to see you, Lord" continues to touch a chord.

\*

We are so much like Thomas. We too want proofs and signs. We would like God to prove that God really exists, that there is truly another dimension to existence. We would like God to work some miracles in our personal lives so we could more easily believe. Frederick Beuchner spoke about wanting God to rearrange the stars up in heaven to spell out, "I exist" preferably in English as a sign that there really is a personal God who personally cares for us and our lives.

But we can't, and that's hard for us. We look, though. Quite often you hear about people finding images of Jesus or the virgin Mary on unlikely places. Like the piece of toast that looked like the virgin Mary and was sold on eBay for thousands of dollars. \*Or at the Ikea washroom in Glasgow. \*Or a stain on a towel in Coventry. \* People flock to these things. We want to have something to hold on to. We want an experience that we can remember so that we can be sure.

Or we go off to Israel on a pilgrimage. If we can't see Jesus, at least let's walk where he walked and see the places where he did things. During the two times I've been there, I somehow felt connected to Jesus as I walked where he walked and saw the landscapes that he saw.

What do we do about our nagging doubts? We live in a world that says the only things you can truly know are the things you can see and touch and scientifically verify. "Seeing is believing." What do we do with a religion that cannot produce its central figure? The Bible says Jesus is alive. So if he's alive, why doesn't he show himself now and then to dispel all doubt? He did it for Thomas, why not us? How can we believe without seeing?

There are a few things we should know as we answer that question.

One thing is that even if we would see Jesus that doesn't mean we will believe in him. The Bible is filled with people who saw Jesus didn't believe in him. Jesus points this out in John 6:36 when he says,

\*

But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.

Seeing doesn't mean believing even in the Bible. Jesus was often frustrated by the lack of faith in those he met. In John 4:48 he vented some of this when he said,

\*

Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders you will never believe.

\*

And Jesus showed them a lot of signs and wonders. Yet even then the crowds were fickle. Show us *another* sign. And *another*. Come down from the cross and we will really believe in you. The religious leaders who saw him yet didn't believe in him and opposed him at every turn stand out in the book of John as examples of the mystery of unbelief, the passion of misdirected piety. It was they who had Jesus crucified after all.

Sometimes I am afraid that if I had seen Jesus I might have turned away, too. Here I am, a religious leader. What if I was one back then. How would I have responded to Jesus in the flesh? Sometimes we don't want to believe what is staring us in the face. There is no one so blind as he who will not see.

And even seeing the resurrected Jesus didn't mean believing in him. Luke tells the story of when Jesus suddenly appeared among his disciples the first time and showed them his hands and his feet. Look at their reaction:

\*

They still did not believe, because of joy and amazement. (Luke 24:41)

\*

They saw him, but it didn't make sense. It didn't sink in. It took some more effort on Jesus' part to convince them that he was truly alive.

Matthew tells the story about a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus:

\*

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him;

Jesus appears to his disciples on the mountain in Galilee. There was Jesus, in his glorified body, radiant in all his royal splendor. Matthew says that they fell down and worshipped him. That was the appropriate response. You see Jesus in his resurrected state and you fall to your knees.

But Matthew adds this unsettling little detail:

\*

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; **but some doubted**

"But some doubted." What kind of a response is that? It's everything you and I would wish for

and yet they doubted. They couldn't make sense of it so they went to incredulity. You can just imagine them thinking to themselves, "This could be a trick; false news; I need more evidence."

That seems so strange to us who long for a glimpse of Jesus, who ask him for a little peek through the window on a starry night. We tell ourselves that we would be different. But would we?

But we don't have that opportunity. Jesus is in heaven and is not going to reveal himself again until the last day. We will never have the same opportunity as the disciples.

And that leads us to the next thing we have to think about. Even though we will not get even a glimpse of Jesus, we do have good reason to believe in him.

\*

We are like the man that theologian Karl Barth speaks about. A man in his living room stands by a window gazing into the street. Outside, people are shading their eyes with their hands and looking up into the sky above his house. Because of the overhang of the building, though, the man cannot see what it is they are pointing toward. He cranes his neck as far as possible but he can't see it. He lies down on the floor to get a better angle. But he just can't see what they see.

\*

We who live two thousand years after Jesus are like that man. We hear the shouts of joy and victory. We see the gestures the disciples and their words in the Gospels. We read the story of Jesus and Thomas. We imagine him touching Jesus wounds, dealing with the undeniable facts and finally saying, "My Lord and my God!" They saw it all. We see them there gazing up. And yet no amount of neck-craning will allow us a glimpse of Jesus in the flesh.

All we have is these people on the street shouting to us through the window: "It's the Lord! He's alive! I've seen it with my own eyes." We have to believe that what they say is indeed true.

All we have is the Bible. All we have is the revelation of God as recorded by the first eye-witnesses of Jesus. As Peter says,

\*

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. (2 Peter 1:16)

They saw it and they declared it. They heard the voice of God and they spread it around. They saw it for us, and we trust their word for it.

\*

Phillip Yancey, in his excellent book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, writes,

\*

In a delicious irony, the figure who has changed history more than any other managed to escape the attention of most scholars and historians of his own time. Even the four men who wrote the Gospels omitted much that would interest modern readers, skipping over nine-tenths of his life. Since none devotes a word to physical description, we know nothing about Jesus's shape or stature or eye colour. Details of his family life

are so scant that scholars still debate whether or not he had brothers and sisters. The facts of biography considered essential to modern readers simply did not concern the gospel writers.

\*

And yet the Bible reveals as much about Jesus as we need to know. And it gives us the details of what he did. John tells us in verse 31 of our passage that he wrote all these things about Jesus so that we

\*

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.

He could have filled volumes and libraries about Jesus, but he gave the Reader's Digest version so that we could get the picture of who Jesus is. John and the other writers of the Bible give us a reliable record of this remarkable man who lived among us.

\*

And we have the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to help us understand that word. The Holy Spirit teaches us the truth about Jesus and convinces us that the things written about him are true. Somehow we felt drawn to him. Something within us tells us that we can trust what the eye-witnesses of Jesus say. Something within us is moved to believe that this person they tell us about is alive. It's not just history, it's reality. Something within us tells us that it's alright to surrender our lives to him. That's the Holy Spirit at work within us, creating faith, guiding our first steps in believing.

Jesus anticipated a day like today, when people would believe in him without seeing him. And he speaks another beatitude to them, a word of blessing:

\*

Blessed are those who believe without seeing.

Blessed are those who rely on the revelation of the word and the prompting of the Holy Spirit. They are equally blessed as Thomas and the disciples were who actually saw Jesus, perhaps even nobler.

That thought is echoed in 1 Peter 1:8. Peter, writing to persecuted Christians, writes,

\*

Though you have not seen him, you love him; even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

We have the Bible and the Holy Spirit and we live by faith. Faith by definition is believing without seeing. It is a knowledge and conviction that the things said about Jesus are true and that we share in what he accomplished.

That points us to one last matter to dwell upon. There is a blessing that comes when we believe without seeing.

What is the blessing of believing without seeing? Peter says that we will be filled with

inexpressible and glorious joy and will receive the salvation of your soul. John says that in believing you will have life. Your life will be transformed. You will not be spared the pains and sufferings of this life. But you will have a peace and joy about you in those pains and sufferings. You will have a new life burning within you that nothing can put out.

We once had a participant in the Christianity Explored Course who came from a Muslim background. He was dating a Christian so he thought he'd check out who Jesus is and what he said. The course goes through the Book of Mark and lets the participants hear Jesus explain himself to his disciples and the world. That's all we did. We read from the Book of Mark, watched a video of someone explaining it, and then discussed it. At the end of the course he said he was drawn to the person of Jesus. Something about Jesus rang deeply in his soul and he joyfully began to believe in him. He found a joy and peace in his heart that continues to today. No great drama, but a peace that is real.

Maybe you have a story like that. Maybe your life changed dramatically when you came to believe in Jesus. Your selfish, proud heart melted and you became the first to help others. You got rid of bitterness and anger and became more gracious and kinder. You became a different person and there was no other explanation than that you had become a believer. Or you slowly changed because the peace that lodged in your heart wouldn't let you stay the same.

He, like all those who believe without seeing, whose lives are transformed by faith, show that Christianity works, that Christ is real, and that he can be completely trusted. They reveal in themselves the blessedness that comes from believing without seeing and trusting in the promises of God. There is great power and blessing in a life that believes in Christ, loves in Christ, walks in Christ until the day we see Jesus face to face and live a joyful, glorious life with him.

AMEN

"You believe because you have seen me.  
Blessed are those who haven't seen me and believe anyway. John 20:29

Jesus, we dare to believe in the things we cannot see:  
In your love for us  
In your love for those around us  
In the hope of eternity.  
We dare to believe that another world is possible  
That suffering can end  
That tears will be dried up  
That peace will prevail  
That a new kingdom is here and is coming  
And we can play a part in all these things.  
We dare to believe that the light can break through  
In justice made new  
In your love for us.  
In this time beyond your resurrection. AMEN