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Seeing and Believing. Believing and Seeing

John 20:19-31 19When 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." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So 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." 26A 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." 27Then 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." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But 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.

Seeing and believing. Believing and seeing. As modern, scientific folks, we are more accustomed to believing **because** we first see. Our language, in fact, is full of expressions that express that point of view like: "I'll believe it when I see it with my own eyes." We even have a state – Missouri – whose motto captures this point of view: "The Show-Me State." President Reagan once said in relation to the discussion of disarmament agreements, "Trust – but verify"; that is, believe indeed – but only once you are satisfied with the evidence that is front of your eyes. In this sense, Jesus' disciple Thomas, who has come to be known as "Doubting Thomas," was, we might say, a precursor to this very modern attitude. *"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,"* said Thomas, **"I will not believe."** Thomas, the "show-me" disciple!

Now, I am going to be a little contrary this morning and say that I believe Thomas actually too often gets a bad rap. After all, even that traditional name that he is tagged with – “**Doubting** Thomas” – subtly suggests that there is something wrong, something unfaithful somehow, with this, shall we say, scientific point of view; that there is something unseemly about not believing, being unable and unwilling to believe, until you are satisfied by “first-person” evidence that is tangible. But here’s the thing: Thomas’ point of view is not, in fact, **necessarily** bad or unfaithful. Even the Risen Jesus didn’t criticize him! No, Jesus’ response to Thomas shows that He understands Thomas’ skepticism, his need to not only trust but verify with his own eyes and hands; in fact, Jesus submits to his request! Would he have done that if he thought the very request itself was unfaithful or wrong? I don’t think so. In fact, I think that a fairer name for Thomas is not “**doubting**” Thomas, but “**confirming**” Thomas. Now, while that doesn’t quite have the same ring to it, it’s both a lot kinder and it reminds us of a very important truth that underlies Thomas’ point of view, that one should believe only after one sees.

Let me give you a couple of examples of why I think that Jesus didn’t criticize Thomas for his insistence on confirming with his own senses, and, moreover, why this is in fact an attitude that **we** sorely need to have – at least to some degree – in our lives, in our relationships, in our church. For, first of all, think about it: If we followed Thomas’ example and were unwilling to believe without real evidence, think about how much harmful gossip could be nipped in the bud! Now, sometimes gossip is benign; it’s simply a way of sharing more or less innocuous information. But sometimes, as you and I well know, it’s more insidious than that and something is said of someone – “*Did you know she did THIS?*” “*Did you hear that she actually said THAT?*” “*I heard from a friend of a friend that so-and-so did something really awful*” – that simply ought not be said or circulated because it’s not in fact true. Think how much misery could be

avoided if the one receiving such gossip took Thomas' point of view and said "That has not been my experience of him, and I am not going to believe or pass along that rumor until or unless I see and hear it myself." Just think how much unnecessary pain and hurt could be avoided by following Thomas' rule!

Or consider what you sometimes hear in any church or club or organization. Sometimes someone new to the family, excited and enthused to be a part and brimming with ideas about things to do and ways to fulfill the mission, will suggest doing this or that. And one of the most absolutely dispiriting responses that such a person can receive is *"Oh, we tried that 10, 15, 20 years ago and it didn't work."* Oh, how much better it would be to adopt Thomas' point of view and respond instead by saying, *"Well, since things change, and context changes, and people change, we are not going to dampen or dispirit until or unless we see with our own eyes that this idea won't work now – so go for it, try it, and we'll support you."* Do you hear the difference? Sometimes what we believe can keep us from seeing possibility! And so Thomas' point of view is worth commending here too: Let's see with our own eyes how it works – for it might just succeed wildly this time!

At the same time, while Thomas' way – *"I will not believe until I see with my own eyes"* – has some real merit to it, on the other hand, it cannot be the **only** way that you or I or our church lives its life. Because if we are restricted to **only** what we can prove, **only** what we can confirm, **only** what there is overwhelming evidence for, then we will live far, far narrower and tinier and punier lives, both as persons and as a church, than we ever needed to! Let me put it this way: While sometimes seeing **is** believing, on other occasions it is only **because** we believe that we can come to see. Now, that's all very abstract-sounding; let me illustrate the point with a story. Wyvetta Bullock is an African-American Lutheran minister who remembers growing up in the

segregated south of the 1950s and '60s. She sais this:

Do you believe in things you cannot see? Growing up in the 50's and 60's in the southern part of the United States, I learned the value of believing **before** seeing. In the face of being devalued and discriminated against, I believed that my neighbor and I were created equal. And in the midst of being told that I did not possess the academic capacity of my white counterparts, I believed that I could grow and matriculate through schools of higher learning.... My parents were people of faith and trust. They passed on to me the gift of faith for believing in what seems impossible.

And then she illustrates this point of view with a wonderful story about a

...pre-civil rights African American community in Florida. The story says that during times of political elections, this community would rent a voting machine and go through the voting process. Now, they knew that their votes would not be counted, but they voted anyway. When asked by members of the white community why they did this every year, they replied, "Oh, just practicing. Just practicing." Believing in what is not yet seen means we practice or behave as if it is already exists. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." This is what leaders and visionaries do. They believe in something bigger than themselves and they begin to act as if it is so.¹

That community was on to something; Rev. Bullock's parents were onto something, Dr. King was onto something: sometimes life places in front of us the choice to believe and act as if something were true even if we don't see it yet.

Every teacher in this room can tell you of a student who was thought to be seemingly unteachable or who just couldn't be reached or whose attitude was self-

¹http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/bullock_4912.htm

defeating and self-destructive, and who, if you simply believed the evidence in front of your eyes, would need to continue to be written off. But sometimes a special teacher could reach out and indeed act – contrary to what was before his or her eyes – believing that such a student could achieve, could change his or her ways, could come to find a love of learning. And so the teacher acted as if this was the case – believing before seeing! – and the student’s life was forever changed and he came to live **up** to those expectations instead of living **down** to his reputation.

The point of all this? Well, every life and every church needs both that Thomas-point-of-view – *“I won’t believe it until I see it”* – **AND** the point of view that Jesus commended, blessed are those “have not seen and yet believe.” The first, Thomas’ way, can indeed keep us from passing along bad gossip, from dampening people’s enthusiasms, from being too quick to judge in the absence of evidence, from being duped apparently appealing but ultimately dumb ideas. But every life and every church also needs that other point of view, that the way we will come to see something is by **first** believing that it is possible and **then** acting as if it already it is a reality.

Let me close with a story from William Willamon, who is now a Methodist bishop, but who tells this story from his earliest days in ministry.

My first church was in rural Georgia. I was fresh out of seminary, eager to be a good pastor in my first parish. I was in graduate school at the time, commuting out to the hinterland on the weekends. Most Sunday mornings at dawn, it was a tough trip out there from Atlanta. I used to say, “This trip only takes thirty minutes but takes us back thirty centuries.” ... [On] My first visit to [the church], I found a large chain and padlock on the front door, put there, I was told, by the local Sheriff. “The Sheriff, why?” I asked. “Well, things got out of hand at the board meeting last month, folks started ripping up carpet, dragging out the pews they

had given in memory of their mothers. It got bad. The Sheriff come out here and put that there lock on the door until our new preacher could come and settle things down.” That rather typified my time at that church. I would drive out there each Sunday, just praying for a miraculous snowstorm in October which would save me from another Sunday I spent a year there that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, I planned, I taught, I pled but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take. It was tough and I was glad to be leaving them behind..... A couple of years later... I ran into a young man who told me that he was now serving that church....

“They still remember you out there,” he said. “Yea,” I said glumly, “I remember them too.” “Remarkable bunch of people,” he said. “Remarkable,” I said. “Their ministry to the community has been a wonder,” he continued. “That little church is now supporting, in one way or another, more than a dozen of the troubled families around the church. The free day care center is going great. Not too many interracial congregations like them in North Georgia.” I could hardly believe what he was telling me. What happened? I asked. “I don’t know. One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn’t anything in particular. It’s just that, when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly much took off after that.”²

“Things fairly much took off after that.” That’s what can happen when you **both** acknowledge the reality of the evidence in front of you, **and** yet when you refuse to be defeated and deterred by that evidence, when you say “Christ, I am going to live, we

²<http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=15>

are going to live, as if that Kingdom you kept trying to teach us about were indeed true and indeed possible.” **That** is when Christ can slip in through the locked doors of hearts and minds and attitudes. **That** is when Christ can stand there with you and with me saying “Peace.” For, as Bishop Willimon so aptly puts it, “We are church because to us, **even to us**, Christ has come and given us his gifts of Spirit, mission, and forgiveness, commissioning us to give them to the whole world in his name. That’s why we’re called church.”³

Do you see it? Do you believe it?

³**ibid.** Emphasis mine.