

Jim Gill

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“Believing Is Seeing”
Psalm 133 John 20:19-31 | John 1:1-2:2

INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 133

Last night at the Relay for Life we were a walking, talking, dancing, singing demonstration of what it is like for brothers and sisters to dwell together in unity--united in a purpose to support those who have been affected by cancer and to raise money for research to find cures. This morning we gather in unity to seek to offer praise to God and draw support from the unity we have in Jesus Christ. Hear the word of the Lord from Psalm 133.

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN 20:19-29

Last week we read about what happened the morning that Jesus rose. This morning we read about what happened that evening and a week later. Hear the word of the Lord from the gospel of John 20:19-29

Let us pray: Dear Lord, open our eyes to see your truth. Open our ears to hear your voice. Open our minds to receive your word. Open our eyes. Open our ears. Open our minds, dear Lord.

Last Sunday was the first time that Easter occurred on April Fool's Day since 1956. In many places around the world the first Sunday after Easter is Holy Humor Sunday--as opposed to which some liturgical calendars call "Low Sunday" like I wrote about in this week's Faith Lift.

Holy Humor Sunday is based on the understanding that the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate joke on death, Satan, and all the forces of evil. The resurrection is comedy of the best sort, the unexpected reversal of expectations. Mary comes to the tomb on Easter morning expecting to find a dead body. Her train of thought keeps barreling along one track, and she almost literally stumbles over the risen Lord, asking, "Can you tell me where you have laid you? "

Resurrection reverses the expectation of gloom and doom in the face of death and instead brings celebration. Alleluia!

In the midst of these Holy Humorous turnabouts we have a realist--Thomas. I have always felt sorry for him. One incident, one remark, after a particularly traumatic experience ... the murder of his master ... has tarred him with a derogatory nickname. Thomas became Doubting Thomas, and his name has been used ever since as a euphemism for the skeptic. It makes no difference that the rest of Thomas' life was marked by faithful service to his Lord including traveling to India starting churches where he was eventually was martyred for his faith

The first time we encounter Thomas is in chapter 11 of John. Jesus had just been informed that his friend, Lazarus, was so sick that he was about to die. Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were in Bethany near Jerusalem, but

Jesus and the disciples were some miles away over across the Jordan. They had gone there to escape the hostility of the temple leaders who had recently tried to have Jesus stoned. Word finally came that it was too late, Lazarus was dead. Two days went by. Suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, Jesus said, "Let's go over to Bethany to see Lazarus."

"Wait a minute," the disciples say. "It is too risky. You are liable to be killed if you go that near to Jerusalem."

The twelve knew how dangerous it is to make such a trip ... especially if it was only to pay last respects. But here we meet Thomas for the first time. He says to the rest, "Let us also go ... that we may die with him" (John 11:16). Do we call him "**Inspiring Thomas?**"

The next time we find Thomas mentioned in scripture is in chapter 14 of John. The apostles had gathered to celebrate the Passover. Their master was trying to explain to them that the task for which he had come to earth was about to be undertaken. Jesus would be leaving them — he would be returning to his heavenly Father, but he was doing it so these twelve, as well as all the countless others who would believe throughout history, would be able to join him there.

It might have been easier for them all to just let Jesus keep on talking in hopes that they would somehow begin to understand. They were afraid to sound stupid by asking a question. It was not so with Thomas. If he had a question, he would ask it ... even when no one else would.

"Wait a minute, Lord," says Thomas. "We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5).

That is a good question ... and it got a tremendous answer: "I am the way ... the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Thomas was thoughtful ... and that is good. A faith that requires acceptance without thinking is not faith, it is gullibility. Do we call him "**Inquiring Thomas?**"

Now we meet Thomas for the third time in the gospel account. The other disciples tell him that Jesus had risen from the dead. But Thomas cannot believe it. It is not as if the man refuses to accept the possibility of the dead being raised; after all, he had seen that very thing happen with the daughter of Jairus and the son of the widow of Nain ... and he had seen it with Lazarus.

But this was different. Jesus had not died of natural causes ... causes that could somehow miraculously be reversed by the intervention of the Son of God. This was murder — spears and nails and a cross. A thoughtful man would have to say that this kind of death is not reversible ... and Thomas tells the others precisely that. "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."

Thomas was a realist. He had been hurt and disappointed. He had expected so much from Jesus. To watch Jesus die on the cross like a common thief was too

much for Thomas to bear. He had his hopes dashed once. Now he wanted to be careful because he didn't want to set himself up for another letdown.

A week later the disciples were together again; this time Thomas was with them. Again, the doors were locked; but suddenly, Jesus stood among them. Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger into my hands. Put your hand into my side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe" Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

In this story we have the one place in the all the Gospels where the Divinity of Christ is bluntly and unequivocally stated. Look at his confession, "My Lord, and my God." Yet we don't call him, "**Professing Thomas.**"

We have to admire Thomas for being so honest with his doubts. Even though it was a fact that was attested by 10 of his closest friends, he could not believe it. He said "I'll believe it when I see it," or "I won't believe unless I see it." "Seeing is believing." Jesus chided Thomas and said, "Thomas you believe because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." Believing is seeing.

Perhaps Thomas' real problem was that he was devastated by what had happened and would not admit it. He couldn't admit it to his friends, not even to himself. He was so devastated that he could not see what had to be the sheer joy on his friends' faces. After all, what they experienced in meeting the resurrected Jesus totally changed them. It was their encounter with the risen Lord that empowered them to publicly and powerfully proclaim the good news, the news that, over time would turn the world upside down.

No doubt there are folks in our churches in exactly the same boat. Life has dealt some crushing blows — marriages break, homes split, jobs disappear, addictions overpower, diseases devastate, grief grows into despair. We may call ourselves Easter people but it still looks like a Good Friday world.

The message of the gospel to those who cannot see the Easter joy is, "Open your eyes!" See what God has done. Celebrate it. Even laugh about it. That is a reminder we all need from time to time. Life can be so burdensome; we can be depressed, discouraged, despondent. Then along comes a day like this one. A day for laughter and light-heartedness, for comedy and craziness, a day to celebrate the victory of the resurrection over death and the grave, a day to join our voices with the God who "sits in the heavens and laughs," a day to remember the word of Jesus who said, "I am come that [you] might have life and that [you] might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10 KJV). 1

A friend of mine had something happen that could have caused her to do anything but laugh. It could have caused her to doubt. She is a Harvey Survivor who was flooded out and even now is having to move all of her belongings to another place. In the midst of moving on Palm Sunday weekend she lost her purse.

She wasn't concerned about the debit cards, checkbook or cash. Those would be easy to replace. She was stressed because her new reading glasses that she had just bought a couple of months ago and her dental partial were in her purse. They were worth around \$1,500 combined.

On the day before Easter she checked her mail and found a small thin box. The return address was a man's first name, a PO Box and city state and zip. Inside the box as her wallet with her credit cards and all the cash that was in it.

In hope, she decided to go on Facebook and look for every one that had the first name of Gary in the town that the postmark from where the package was sent. Her message explained that she really needed to find her purse and asked if they could call and tell her where he found the wallet. She listed her phone number. After sending the private messages, she thought, "I'll never hear from anyone."

30 minutes later she got a phone call from the area code of that City. "Hello I'm the gentleman that found your billfold. I found it on I-10 on the shoulder, where I stopped because I thought I was having a flat. It turned out I wasn't having a flat. But, when I walked around the front of my vehicle I saw this billfold. So, I picked it up, got your name and took it to the post office on Monday to mail it back to you."

She thanked this gentleman several times and reiterated how important it was that she knew the exact location so that she could go back in the hopes of finding her glasses and her partial. He gave her the information and she and her husband drove directly there and started combing through the grass.

On her Facebook post describing what happened next she wrote, "Right away, I found some highlighters that I recognized, which had been in my purse. I start looking farther down and I find a couple of more items that I recognized from my purse. It's obvious now that I left my purse on one of our vehicles while we were at the storage unit, and it flew off of a bumper while we were driving down the freeway. Suddenly, I found my glasses case. I opened it up and lo and behold the glasses were fully intact. I traveled a little farther down the shoulder, and I find more articles from my purse. Then I find the purse. Then I find the case for my partial. Amazed, I opened it up. But there's no partial inside. I started combing through the grass on my hands and knees. Nothing!

I traveled 10, 20 feet further down the shoulder. No luck. I decided to go back and mark the area where the purse was, with the hope of coming back later with a magnet and searching again for the partial. But while walking back the other direction, with the sun now behind my back, the lighting was different. I look right where my purse was and there they are--the rest of my smile! I can tell you, I was elated! What an amazing blessing to find both the glasses and my partial intact.

Now some might say, "That's not a miracle! A miracle would be something bigger. But I disagree. Just think . . . what if the guy wouldn't have thought he was getting a flat? Would anyone ever have found the billfold? What if he would have had a flat and been so distracted in repairing it, that he didn't see my billfold? What if it had already been raining? And he was so distracted by the rain

that he didn't see the billfold. What are the odds? He stopped right there where the billfold was.

I believe that these small miracles are just as important as the big ones. They are reminders to us to keep the faith. They remind us to trust and have faith and to know that when a bigger need arises there will be help. There will be miracles. You must press on and be faithful and trust that help will be there.

She wrote, "Well, that's my Easter miracle. I hope it gives you something to think about tomorrow. We missed Easter services, which has only happened a couple times in my life. But I feel surrounded by the blessing of Our Lord. And I know he is right there with me every day! No matter where I am. Be faithful. Be positive!"

I'd like to add a couple more what ifs. What if the person wasn't the kind of person that would mail the wallet to its owner? What if the person in the town that sent the wallet didn't have a Facebook account or didn't check it? More importantly, what if my friend hadn't had the kind of faith that said, "Well, I'll just send a Facebook notice to everyone in that town with the first name Gary?"

That is a case of having Faith to try something that seems impossible. That is a case where "Believing became Seeing."

Do I believe in miracles? Yes. By definition, miracles defy explanation. Miracles point us to God who defies explanation and requires faith to accept, to believe, the unbelievable. Throughout the years since Jesus' coming, miracles have continued to occur. Healings still happen. Perhaps those are physical healings, or spiritual healings or emotional healings. The lump is no longer there. The old rebellious spirit is no longer there. The anger and hurt are no longer there. God works within the chemistry of our body. God works through the prayers of our spirits. God works within the longings of our heart.

The important message of our Scripture lesson this morning is that Jesus praised faith in people who believed in the absence of signs and wonders. Jesus says to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

There is a 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.

At St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Houston where I served as an Associate Pastor from 1981 to 1991 there is a staircase that has this inscription. "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." **SLIDE.** This is what leaders and visionaries do. They believe in something bigger than themselves and they begin to act as if it is so. 2

Whoever painted those words on that stairwell at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church failed to add the attribution to that quote. Can any of you guess who first said it? Last week our country observed the 50th anniversary of his assassination --the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

We're in the same situation that Thomas was in before Jesus appeared to him. We have not seen Jesus. We have to take Thomas' word for it. We have to take the word of all the disciples, their friends and the people they shared their story with. We have to take the word of those who wrote down what they saw and heard. We are among the "blessed ones" who have not seen and YET ...believe!

Faith is taking the first step of sending a private message to everyone named Gary." Faith is sending private and even PUBLIC messages to every Tom Dick and Harry that Christ is Risen!

John ends this chapter with verses 30-31, "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."

To look at our church who would have believed that from all the Faith Based Teams at Relay for Life that we would raise the most money? Who would have believed that we would sell the most luminaries of every Team? Looking at the receipts the organizers would say, "Seeing is believing." However God... and "Inspiring, Inquiring and Professing Thomas" would say, "Believing is Seeing."

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we give you thanks for all that has been recorded in the gospels of all that Jesus performed in the presence of the apostles. We rejoice in the other signs too numerous to be written that Christ has given among your people, then and now: the healing of the sick, the peace that has been given to those who have been doubtful but wanting to believe. We exult in the fellowship our risen Lord and live in hope of the final triumph of his rule.

United in Christ, may we become your agents of reconciliation in the church and in the world. Where class and race cause hurtful distinctions, help us to proclaim your covenant promises. Where peoples contend with one another over conflicting ideologies make us the mediators of their differences. In all that we do, breathe the Holy Spirit upon us so that we may stand united as brothers and sisters to the glory and praise of your Holy name. Amen.

1 CSS Publishing Company, Inc., Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit, by David E. Leininger

2 Must We See to Believe?, by Wyvetta Bullock