

BELIEVING HELPS US SEE
The Second Sunday of Easter

(04/07/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 28:1-20

“Then Jesus said to them [the women], ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’” (Mt. 28:10)

Good morning! It is good to see you today, the second Sunday of Easter. Easter Sunday, of course, is the first Sunday of Easter. As those of you who have been hanging around this church for some time know, the liturgical season of Easter is one of my favorite times of the Christian year. It is a time when we read the gospel accounts of how the disciples encounter Jesus, encounter their risen Lord, or are encountered by him. Their experiences of rediscovering the One whom they felt they had lost can guide us in our own experiences of our risen Lord, can guide us in the deepening of our relationship with Jesus.

In our scripture lesson this morning, when Jesus meets the women who had come to the tomb two days following his crucifixion to prepare his body for burial, the very first thing he tells them is “Do not be afraid.” I wonder why he said that.

That phrase, “Do not be afraid,” occurs several times in the Bible. There are times when leaders say this to calm people’s fears when they are going into battle or facing some daunting challenge that God or life has placed in their path. There are other times when it addresses what the theologian Rudolf Otto might call “the fear of the numinous,” the experience of being encountered by God, the experience of the transcendent breaking into our world of space and time. This experience, as C. G. Jung has noted, can turn our life upside down! Even though it turns our life around in a good way, it is still an unsettling experience, one that we commonly resist.

In the Book of Exodus, we read that Moses is in the wilderness tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush. When Moses walks up to the bush, trying to understand why it is not consumed by the flame, he hears God speaking to him from the bush. God tells him to remove the sandals from his feet for the ground upon which he stands is holy ground.

The ground on which he stands is holy ground. We sometimes connect holy ground with a geographical place, like the Holy Land. In the Holy Land, even today, people are fighting over a piece of land that they consider sacred, as if some pieces of land are sacred and some are not. Some people consider church sanctuaries as sacred spaces, but not the side of a lake or a seashore—or a robin’s nest. However, the book of

Exodus tells us that any place where we encounter God is holy ground, even if the encounter, the consciousness of God takes place in the wilderness.

If what St. Augustine said is true, that God is like a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, then the center of God is not only here in this sanctuary; it is inside you, and you, and you. And if the circumference is nowhere, then God's presence extends past the outer boundaries of the universe. If there is no place where God is not, every place is holy ground!

Going back to God's encounter with Moses, we read, "And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

The counsel not to be afraid also appears in the gospels. As recorded in Luke, when the angel comes to Mary to tell her that she is to bear a son who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, the angel says, "The Lord is with you." Then, in response to Mary's confusion, the angel says, "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God." Tomorrow, you may know, is the feast of the Annunciation, our remembrance and celebration of Mary's powerful encounter with the sacred, an encounter that changed not only her life, but also the world!

Yes, an encounter with the living God can turn our small, ego-centric life upside down! When we have what the psychologist William James would describe as a religious experience, what the theologian Rudolf Otto would describe as an experience of the *mysterium tremendum*, we have a sense of how small we are, how weak, how vulnerable! And we are filled with fear—or, perhaps, awe! Think of what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. His experience of the risen Christ turned his life around! He changed from being a persecutor of Christians to the greatest Christian missionary and theologian in the history of the church.

Fear is a powerful emotion. It can arise when our life is threatened, but it can also emerge when our well-being or even our self-image is threatened. Some fears are realistic; others are just plain neurotic. General George Patton said, "There is a time to take counsel of your fears, and there is a time to never listen to any fear." Unfortunately, General Patton doesn't tell us how to know into which category our current fear fits. We do know that neurotic fear backs us off from life, from taking on the challenges of life.

Over the past four years, most of us have experienced some degree of fear. We have lived through a worldwide pandemic that has claimed the lives of a million people in our country and over six million people around the world. We realized that our loved ones could be the agents of our death, and vice versa. We experienced our vulnerability,

realizing how arbitrary national boundaries are in a global world. We lost loved ones in our families and in our church, some of whom died alone because of pandemic restrictions. Not only is the pandemic not over, the politicization of our response, coupled with our ambivalent commitment to making sacrifices for the common good, falls short of heartening. We wonder what will happen should a more lethal variant be loosed on us in the future.

I was reminded of this earlier this week when I was reading about the damage that the bird flu was causing, and how it is already crossing species boundaries to enter into mammals and even humans.

Most of us remember times when, as a child, we experienced fear. We were afraid of what we saw or what we thought we saw. When our parents fought, we were afraid that our personal security was threatened. We feared being bullied, especially if we were members of a minority group that was the object of prejudice, hostility, and discrimination. These fears sometimes found expression in nightmares that haunted us after we awoke. If we believe something is real, we are more apt to see it—even when it isn't there.

The point is that just as there is a connection between seeing and believing, there is a connection between believing and seeing. Believing can help us see what is there and, like ghosts, also what is not there. Here I think of QAnon and other conspiracy theories that poison and polarize our society.

When Mary and the other disciples see the risen Christ, they grasp the power of the resurrection. When Thomas feels the nail holes in Jesus' hands, he realizes that the one who stands before him is Jesus. Jesus says to him, "Thomas, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe."

In this passage, Jesus is describing us! We were not privileged to walk with Jesus, to listen to his teachings, to observe his healing miracles. Unlike Thomas, we were not invited to feel the wounds in Jesus' hands and side. If we are to discover Jesus, we need to do so in a new way. We might discover him through the Bible, which contains the record of his time with us on earth in human form, or as the Holy Spirit, a presence both within us and among us. Once we experience him this way our faith is strengthened. Then because of our belief in his presence, we can discover or rediscover him not only in worship but also in our everyday life!

The disciples went through a difficult period following the crucifixion. They were disheartened and afraid. They must have wondered if it had been a mistake to follow this man. They were uncertain about the future, about whether the story had ended.

As we know, the story had not ended! The story will never end because there was a resurrection! Mary Magdalene saw and heard her risen Lord by the side of the tomb. The disciples encountered him in the Upper Room, on the road to Emmaus, and by the side of the lake. Because they saw, because they experienced the risen Christ, they finally understood and believed.

We need to remember, however, that not everyone saw the risen Christ. In fact, very few people saw him. Only those who were closest to him: Mary and the other disciples saw him. There is no record that even his mother saw him.

A skeptic would probably not accept the disciples' experiences as compelling evidence of the historicity of the resurrection. They would suggest that the disciples saw what they wanted to see—an example of what Sigmund Freud called hallucinatory wish fulfillment. Then again, skeptics view the world differently from believers. They are so focused on the negative that they fail to see the possible, even when the possible becomes a reality. It is true that there is no independent objective confirmation of the historicity of the resurrection. Yet we believe! So, we are either really stupid or really smart!

Of course, I think we are really smart! The reason why only some people could see the risen Christ was not because he was not present as a living reality in the world. It is because there are some realities, some dimensions of reality that can only be grasped through faith. The risen Christ was present to all and in all. However, only those who believed, who saw through the eyes of faith, could see him.

We do not believe in the resurrection because Mary saw the risen Christ by the tomb, or because the disciples encountered him in Galilee. We believe because *we* have seen him and heard him. We have sensed his presence within and among us. We have heard his voice when we turn to him in prayer. We can experience his presence in our lives and in the world because we, like Mary and the other disciples, see through the eyes of faith.

As Antoine de Saint-Exupery has said in *The Little Prince*, “And now, here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Our faith does not cloud or distort our perception; it enables us to see more deeply into the mysterious reality of life! It enables us to sense God's presence even when we are going through difficult times! This explains why mystics can see things that we ordinary mortals cannot see. It is because they see through the eyes of a deeper faith!

Mary and the other disciples could see, could sense, and could experience their risen Lord in the most common everyday places, places like Galilee. We, too, can see, hear, and experience his presence in our everyday life. Because we believe, we can hear his words speak to us from the Bible; we can feel his comforting presence in times of prayer. Because we believe he lives in the world, we meet him in the most mundane places and activities. Our belief leads us to realize that whatsoever we do to the immigrant, to the refugee, to people of a different race or sexual orientation, to those of a different religion, we do to him. For those of us who believe, we witness to his presence within this little church!

Believing helps us to see deeper! Easter is an invitation to see deeper! It is an invitation to see deeper into God, deeper into Jesus, and deeper into the mystery of life. It is an invitation to see deeper into the precious mystery of those around us, the children of God. It is an invitation for us to see deeper into ourselves.

If we believe, if we have faith, then we, like Mary and the other disciples, will experience our Lord's presence. We will experience our Lord's presence in the love and caring that we both find and help to create in the fellowship of this little church.

May the spirit of Easter that touched Mary and the other disciples open us to the presence of the risen Christ within us, within our brothers and sisters, and within the common, everyday elements of the Sacrament of Holy Communion which we now share with each other.

Let us so partake.

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