

BELIEVING HELPS US SEE DEEPER

(05/01/2022)

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)

Jesus tells the women, “Do not be afraid.” That phrase occurs several times in the Bible. It is often a leader’s attempt to calm people’s fears when they are going into battle or facing some daunting challenge that life or God has placed in their path. There are other times when it addresses what we might call “the fear of the numinous,” the experience of being encountered by the transcendent, by God. This experience, as C. G. Jung has noted, turns our life upside down.

As recorded in Exodus 3, Moses is in the wilderness tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appears to him in a flame of fire out of a bush. When Moses walks up to the bush, trying to understand why the bush is not being consumed by the flame, he hears God speaking to him. God tells him to remove the sandals from his feet for the ground upon which he stands is holy ground. Apparently, any place where we encounter God is holy ground, even in the wilderness. Then we read, “And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”

The counsel not to be afraid appears in the gospels. When, as recorded in Luke, 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.”

Yes, an encounter with the living God can turn our small, egocentric 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*, the numinous, we have a sense of how small we are, how weak, how vulnerable. And we are filled with fear! Think of what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus! His experience of the risen Christ totally turned his life around. He changed from being a persecutor of Christians to the greatest Christian missionary.

As recorded in the gospel of Matthew, when the risen Christ encounters the women by the tomb, he tells them, “Do not be afraid.” As we know, the experience of the risen Christ by Mary and the disciples turned their lives upside down.

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 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, he doesn’t tell us which time is which.

Throughout the past 2 ½ 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 carriers of our death and vice versa. We experienced our vulnerability, realizing how arbitrary national boundaries are in a global economy. 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.

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. You may not remember your own nightmares, but if you had children, you might remember theirs, particularly if what they experienced could be classified as night terrors.

When we remember that a dream is a real experience, a psychic event that registers in consciousness, it is easy to see why dreams seem so real. What happens to us when we dream becomes a part of us just like what we experience when we are awake. There is only a short step from having a monster, a witch, or a dinosaur chasing us in a dream to the belief that the monster is really under our bed.

When our son Corey was in the third grade, he brought home a very good report card. This was not unusual; Corey is a very intelligent person and an accomplished minister; he now reads even more than I do. But that’s not the point. The point is that, as a reward for his excellent report card, I told him I would take him to see any movie he wanted. Without a moment’s hesitation, Corey said that he wanted to see the movie, *Jaws*.

Darlene didn’t think this was a good idea. On that occasion I didn’t listen to her. That has happened on several other occasions throughout our marriage, at least according

to her. But, again, that's not the point. The point is that I told her that she was being an overprotective mother and that Corey could handle it just fine.

This sermon is part confession and part apology (though both are coming a little late). Darlene was right and I was wrong. It did not turn out to be a good idea. Corey had terrible nightmares for at least six months. I didn't have nightmares, but I have never been as comfortable in deep water as I was before I saw that movie.

The following summer we were vacationing on one of the Rangeley Lakes. One day I decided to swim out to a little island that was no more than 50 yards from the dock. As I got out into deep water, I felt a wave of fear sweep over me. I swam faster and faster! I honestly believe I could have competed at an Olympic level on that swim! I kept telling myself not to be stupid: sharks are salt-water creatures; they don't live in lakes. But then a little voice whispered in my ear: "But what about barracudas?" Since I didn't know enough about barracudas to be certain that they could not somehow take up residence in a lake, I was really scared!

When he was four years old, our son Jay was afraid that dinosaurs lurked under his bed. I remember the night when Darlene and I told him that there couldn't be any dinosaurs under his bed since dinosaurs died out thousands of years ago. Jay said, "You mean they're extinct?" I said, "If you're smart enough to know what the word "extinct" means, you're smart enough to know that there aren't any dinosaurs under your bed." I'm not sure this was an example of good parenting, but it worked! The dinosaurs disappeared.

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 the dinosaurs under our bed, 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."

Jesus is describing us. We were not privileged to walk with him, to listen to his teachings, to observe his healing miracles. 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.

Last week during my sermon I held up this little weave. For those of you who are connecting to this sermon online, the embroidery over plastic is approximately three inches high and nine inches long. At first glance, it appears as random white and green shapes. However, after a while you may be able to see the word “Jesus” stand out in green letters against a white background.

By the way, for those of you who are not here this morning but are reading this sermon or connecting to it online, I am incredibly handsome, physically fit, and I do not have a receding hairline.

Most of the people here last Sunday saw Jesus. I mean they saw the *word* “Jesus” in this embroidery. Of course, I hope that they also saw him in a deeper way than this! Once, when I used this illustration in a previous church; I mistakenly held the embroidery facing the wrong way. I could see the word Jesus on my side, but the congregation saw only random lines. That didn’t go well! The people who were in church that Sunday thought that there was something wrong with them because they couldn’t see Jesus. I didn’t know what was wrong with them; I could see him quite clearly!

Last week Darlene said that it was easy to see the word “Jesus” from a distance, for example, from the choir loft. It occurred to me that we might be able to use this to recruit people to sing in our choir. We could tell them that it’s easier to see Jesus if you’re in the choir! However, it could also work against us. People might figure that the farther away they are from the pulpit, the more clearly they will be to see Jesus. They could use this to justify staying home on Sunday morning.

Like the word on this piece of embroidery, once you see it, you can find it again more easily. If you experience moments when you can’t see it, you will keep looking. This is because you believe that it’s there. So, seeing helps us to believe, but belief can help us see. Because we believe, we will be more open to Jesus’ presence in our life and in other people. We will be able to discern how he is working for healing in the world.

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 and take his teachings to heart. 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. 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—a clear case 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 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.

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.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
May 1, 2022*