

“Seen”

1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

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John 20:19-31

**19** When 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.” **20** After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. **21** Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” **22** When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

**24** But Thomas (who was called the Twin<sup>[a]</sup>), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. **25** So 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.”

**26** A 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.” **27** Then 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.” **28** Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” **29** Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

**30** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. **31** But these are written so that you may come to

believe[b] that Jesus is the Messiah,[c] the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

During my first year of teaching, my mentor teacher told our cohort this story. She was standing at the door to welcome students on a Monday morning and a little girl came up to her.

"Mrs. Ray, were you at the Walmart on Friday? Did you have strawberries, cookies, and some chicken in your cart?"

"Why yes, I was!" Mrs. Ray replied with a smile.

The little girl looked at her conspiratorially and said in a hushed voice,

**"I seen ya."**

Mrs. Ray told a group of new teachers this story as a light-hearted reminder of our visibility. Indeed teachers are almost like celebrities when seen outside the natural habitat of their classrooms. She wanted us to remember, to be mindful of when we are seen and the little eyes that are watching, remembering.

These days we are seeing each other differently. We are used to seeing one another in person, at church, around town; and being seen. I am used to seeing your children, hearing about their lives, seeing the spaces in their mouths where teeth used to be, celebrating their birthdays, and seeing them grow with my own eyes.

We are used to speaking, being, relating in person so we can see beyond what someone says and have a sense of their heart, so we can be community and care for one another deeply. We are seeing one another in new ways- zoom calls that reveal the levels of loungewear people are willing to display, pictures of homes where projects are done and undone, photos of neighborhoods that rejoice in the resurrection together and display symbols of hope, high school yearbook photos of solidarity, acts of service in sewing and giving, moments of chaos and uninterrupted love.

Some "form of the word 'see' is used more than 20 times in John's gospel with the same range of meaning it has in English, from physical seeing to comprehending."<sup>1</sup> Seeing, understanding, and believing are all wrapped up

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<sup>1</sup> Bartlett, D. L. (2015). *Feasting on the word* (Vol. 2). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

together. And in the story, in chapter 20, there is a progression, a development of things seen. Mary Magdalene sees a stone that has been taken away, the Beloved disciple sees the linen cloths that wrapped Jesus' body, Peter sees the same cloths, but also the one that covered Jesus' head lying apart from the others. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and then the disciples, minus Thomas.

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There is a progression of things seen and a progression of belief. Mary Magdalene sees the empty tomb, and believes when the risen Christ meets her and calls her by name. The Beloved Disciple and Peter saw and believed. Mary tells the disciples what she has seen, but they dismiss her words because they had not seen for themselves. They lock themselves in a room to hide. Locked in fear, Jesus stood among them and showed his hands, his side. The disciples see and rejoice, believe and rejoice.

**"But Thomas, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came."**

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<sup>2</sup> Maloney, F. J. (1998). *Sacra Pagina: John*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press.

The other disciples describe their experience, what they saw. Thomas speaks for all of us who missed out on the appearance of the risen Christ. Thomas voices his need for continuity between this time and the time before; continuity between the Christ he knew and followed, the one who died, and the one who now lives; continuity between what I remember and what is now.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas needs assurance, because already everything he has known has changed and now they want to change it on him again. The other disciples are asking him to see hope when he believes his hope has been destroyed. Thomas speaks for us. Hearing about an extraordinary event, he is unconvinced, he has questions. And, in fact, consider it- he is asking for no less proof than the other disciples received- "see the mark of the nails...put my hand in his side." Thomas needs to see, not just with his eyes, but with his whole being that what they say is true.

Jesus is not offended by Thomas. No, Jesus patiently invites Thomas to see, touch, believe. Jesus reassures Thomas, **so he can go on believing.** For as Jesus shows Thomas his wounds, they share a memory. A memory of what happened

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<sup>3</sup> Gench, F.T. (2007). *Encounters with Jesus*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

when those wounds were created, a memory of the loss. And standing together in that memory, pain and woundedness give way to healing and joy. Remembering his death together will now no longer be a dark, disparaging memory but a liberating, life-giving truth. My Lord and my God! Who knows if Thomas actually reached out to touch those wounds. In bearing witness to them, he responds with one of the greatest statements of faith. Thomas sees fully, believes fully.

Thomas's question is our question. Wellford Hobbie, former professor of homiletics at Union Theological Seminary, says the ultimate question Thomas has is *our* question as well,

"Whether there is someone who knows something of the dust of the earth, something of the blood-stained face human existence wears, and can feel for it."<sup>4</sup>

Seeing the wounds of Christ, asks us to see our own wounds.

Author Philip Yancey was in a car accident in 2007 and he describes when he was in the emergency room, on a stretcher, immobilized to prevent further

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<sup>4</sup> Hobbie, F.W. (1986). *Easter, Proclamation 3: Series C*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

injury and the medical staff was questioning him about where the pain was in his body. He says that he had to describe the pain so they could know best how to heal him. He had to feel the wound, describe it, so healing could be possible.

Children are often not shy about their wounds. They will show you every boo boo and describe it proudly like a badge of courage or proof of a sibling's mistreatment. As we grow up though, we become experts at hiding our wounds, keeping from others those scars and scar tissue that are the marks human existence wears, some things it seems are just too painful to share.

Early this week, my hometown of Seneca was hit by a tornado. The path was not very far from the house I grew up in, where my mom still lives. Throughout the week, pictures and videos have filled my Facebook feed, text message inbox, and heart. Growing up in a small town like Seneca, everyone knows everyone and every place. As I see these images, I'm not just seeing destruction of wind and storm, but I see Mrs. Joan's house and the Wilson's. I have friends who work there, live there, own businesses there. I recognize road names and have memories of camping with friends in backyards in that area. I see downtown, gas stations, businesses, homes that are more to me than sight, they are memories of my heart. The damage is difficult to see- visually and spiritually.

Even more difficult considering the long road ahead for a town already struggling to thrive and survive.

There is someone who knows of the wounds of this life and came and stood before, proclaiming that this was not the end, and giving us a living hope, a memory of our heart.

One who appeared to the disciples with wounds that say this is not the end. The wounds of the risen Christ proclaim that grace has triumphed in the face of the deepest tragedy.<sup>5</sup> The wounds of the risen Christ remind us of the reality of Christ's ministry, suffering, death, AND new life.

Our wounds are seen, but not by one who is unscathed. Our pain is known in the presence of Jesus. That means we do not bear it alone and we do not have to heal alone. Our hope is as alive as the one who swallowed up death. We are not identified by our wounds. We are called anew as children of God. We are not bound by our scars, but redeemed as God's own to live in to our vocation, our calling to see the body of Christ in the world anew.

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<sup>5</sup> Green, J. B., Long, T. G., Powery, L. A., Rigby, C. L., & Sharp, C. J. (2019). *Connections: a lectionary commentary for preaching and worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Rob Schoeck is one of the writers for d365, an ecumenical daily devotion resource. He wrote this week, "Our Easter faith is an invitation to identify the wounds, feel their pain, and seek their healing. Let the peace of God enter your heart so you might be healed and restored."

When Jesus meets the disciples he says, "Peace be with you," breathes on them, and invites them to receive the Holy Spirit, equipping the disciples to bear witness in the world. Christ gives the gift of the Spirit so they may go out and help others to see the impact, the power, the transformation of the resurrection.

**The disciples are to be the witnesses.**

Thomas is the hinge point for all of us to have a faith as real and strong as those first witnesses. For though we have not seen, we believe Christ is risen, death is defeated and the deepest wound cannot diminish joy. We see in our belief. We know it to be true.

And we know it to be true as we see the evidence of the Holy Spirit in community, in one another. Through faith in what we cannot see God opens our eyes to see the body of Christ in the world anew. We are witnesses.

We may be seeing one another differently right now, **so why not see one another differently?**

See with honesty, with compassionate recognition. For in truly seeing one another we make the new life in Christ visible to others. In truly seeing one another, we remind one another of the faith we know to be true, bringing peace to frightened disciples. We share the peace of Christ, proclaiming through locked doors, these wounds are real, but they are not the only reality. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. I seen ya. Amen.