

“Those Who Have Not Seen”

John 20:1-29

2nd Sunday of Easter

April 12, 2026

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

You may have noticed that the paraments hanging from the pulpit are red today. And the stoles that your pastoral staff are wearing are also red. If you didn't notice it, I'm helping you notice it right now...

Does anyone know why we're wearing red?

There are two dates in the church liturgical year when red is the color:

- a) Pentecost (which is 50 days after Easter, we're not there yet)
- AND
- b) Any Sunday when there's an ordination or installation

You see, we will be ordaining and installing new elders to the Session at the second service/a little later in this service. All of which created a choice. We could have white as the liturgical color for Easter, or we could have red. So, at our staff meeting this past Monday, I asked Leigh and Mary Kathleen and Lauren and Nick and Marlon which color they preferred for this service, and the vote was unanimous.

Red.

Red stoles. Red paraments.

I'm glad the vote was red.

You see, red represents something else, something besides ordination and installation, that's very important on this day.

Let me get at that something else by going back to the 17th century.

Back in 1654, on a cold, November night, “a young Frenchman, well known...for his scientific experiments and mathematical genius...sat down to pray in his small apartment in Paris.

“What happened next surprised him. For about two hours, he had an extraordinary experience of the presence of God, which turned his life around and set him on a new trajectory.”

Do any of you know who that mathematical genius was?

Blaise Pascal.

Pascal told NO ONE about this experience when it happened, but he “wrote an account of it which he [proceeded to] hide in the lining of his jacket.”¹

It was only discovered eight years later, right after Pascal died, when a servant was preparing Pascal’s body for burial.

The document is called the *Memorial*.

It begins like this:

"FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ..."

It goes on in this broken, ecstatic way — not an argument, not a doctrine, but a record of encounter, an encounter with the LOVE OF GOD. That’s the second thing I want you to think of when you see the color red this morning...the love of God.

Not just some bland, platitude love as if God is sending us God’s love from a celestial blimp way up in heaven...no!

¹ Graham Tomlin, “Blaise Pascal’s Night of Fire,” March 28, 2026, *Plough Quarterly*.

I want you to think PASSIONATE love.
 I want you to think FIRE.
 I want you to think LOVE that shows up unexpectedly,
 surprising us, overwhelming us, in our lives of faith.

That's the second reason I like the color RED for today.
 Keep that love in mind, as we look again at our text.

I know it was a long story, 29 verses, but I wanted you to hear John's Easter story in its entirety, because there are four distinct parts to the story, almost like scenes in a play.

Act One was our first text for today.
 It's Easter morning.

After hearing from Mary Magdalene that Jesus' body was nowhere to be found, Peter and the beloved disciple race to the tomb.

Peter enters the tomb first.

And then "the other disciple...also went in, and he saw and believed."

Now...you don't have to be a mathematician of the quality of Blaise Pascal to answer the following question:

How many disciples believe the good news of Easter at this point in the story?

Only one.
 The beloved disciple.
 He's the only person whom John says "believed."

And he believed simply by seeing the empty tomb.

So then we get to Act Two.

Mary Magdalene is weeping outside the tomb, looks inside the tomb, sees angels in the tomb...and thinks nothing of them.

She sees the risen Jesus...and thinks nothing of him!

In fact, she mistakes Jesus for the gardener!

“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!”

And at THAT moment,

that startling, inexplicable moment,

when Mary hears the voice of Love,

she knows the good news of Easter to be true.

But do you see what happened there?

It wasn't the empty tomb that made the love of God known to Mary on that first Easter long ago. It wasn't the appearance of angels delivering a message of good news.

It was the voice of Jesus, the voice of Love.

That's how Mary came to believe.

And it's a very different way than the beloved disciple came to believe.

You see, the story of Easter in John's Gospel is a story about the passionate love of God in pursuit of very particular people...a God who

knows their needs before they do, and who comes to those people in a variety of different ways.

Just like God does with you and me.

I'll never forget how one of my preaching professors back in seminary, Dr. Cleo LaRue, told about his call to ministry. How he was 19 years old, and he felt called by God to be a preacher, and he responded to that sense of call by gathering his family together in the living room of their home to share the news.

Just as he began to tell his family what he thought God was asking him to do with his life, the phone rang.

“It was a woman who worked at the hospital with my mother,” LaRue writes. “She said, ‘Mrs. LaRue, I hate to bother you, but I had a dream last night that won’t go away. I dreamed your son was called to preach, and I saw him standing in a room with people gathered around him, and he was trying to tell you what the Lord had done in his life.’”

Dr. LaRue’s mother replied:

“I will have to call you back because that is exactly what he is doing right now.”²

Good grief...I’ve never had a dream like that.
But I do believe that the love of God shows up like that.

² Cleophus J. LaRue, “I Believe I’ll Testify: The Art of African American Preaching,” Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011.

The fire of God.
 The passion of God.
 The love of God arriving in astonishing and wondrous ways.

I think the Gospel writer John knew this kind of Love.

Because after Jesus calls Mary by name on Easter morning, John takes us to Easter evening. It's Act Three. The eleven disciples are hiding, when suddenly...the risen Jesus appears.

- It's not the love of God arriving...as the empty tomb.
- And it's not the love of God...in a mysterious, personal experience of Jesus.

It's God's love made known...in a **community's experience** of Jesus.

It's John reminding us that when we're afraid, frozen by our fears, God's Church will carry us. When we can't go forward in faith, our friends in faith will walk with us.

A colleague once told me about a woman in one of his former churches. She was from Holland, I think...she had lived through the Holocaust.

She was the only member of her family who made it.
 The Nazis took the lives of the other members of her family.
 And one day, after church, she went into her pastor's office.

She told him that whenever they say the Apostles' Creed in worship, and they come to the line about the forgiveness of sins—well, she told her pastor that she could NOT say that phrase.

Because of what happened to her family, she could not say “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

And her pastor responded that she didn’t have to say it. He said that the Creed is intended to stand for the faith of the whole Church, the church universal, through the years.

And then he said this:

“There will be times in each of our lives when we cannot say one part of the Creed or another. But that’s why everyone else stands with you, whether or not you say it. If you remain silent, other voices around you will say it.

They will say it for you.
They will carry you wherever you need to go.”³

Has that kind of thing ever happened to you?

When you couldn’t carry yourself, different people in this church came together to help carry you?

As Augustine of Hippo preached long ago:

“Dwell, and you will be a dwelling.”

“Abide and you will be an abode.”⁴

But speaking of abiding, who wasn’t abiding with them when Jesus appeared to the other disciples on that first Easter evening?

Thomas.

³ I am indebted to the Rev. Roger Quillin for this story.

⁴ Thomas G. Long, “The Love of God,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2017.

“Doubting Thomas.”

Maybe a better name would have been:
“Unlucky Thomas.”

After all, we don’t know why Thomas wasn’t there. We just know that he had been through everything his friends had been through with Jesus, except...except getting to SEE the risen Jesus.

Which leads me to the third reason I think red is so appropriate for today.

You remember the reasons, right?
First reason for red: it’s the liturgical color for ordination.
The proper color for this day.

Second reason?
In my mind, red also stands for the love of God.
The passion of God.

The fire burning in the heart of God for every person in this room, no matter your worries, no matter your warts, no matter your fears, no matter your faith.

Now the third reason is, I don’t know, a bit less serious.
But no less important.
The third reason...is watermelons.
Red reminds me of a nice, tasty watermelon.

You see, I’m thinking of the story that the late church historian, Martin Marty, once told of the summer day when he was eight years old, and a grand miracle of childhood took place:

A watermelon truck overturned right in front of his house!

The uninjured driver watched hopelessly as scores of neighborhood children raced to the scene, and dove into the spilled cargo for a sticky picnic on the pavement!

That was the good news.

The bad news?

Martin Marty was out of town that day!

He missed it.

He never saw the overtured truck, never got the red sweetness on his lips and chin and face...he only heard about it from his friends.⁵

Which, by the way, is exactly what happened to Thomas on that first Easter long ago. He was only hearing about the risen Jesus from his friends!

Not fair.

Not right.

How could Thomas get left out?

All of which brings us to Act Four.⁶

A week later, the disciples are together again, and this time Thomas is with them...and the risen Jesus appears.

And Jesus says 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.”

⁵ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story.

⁶ I am indebted to a lecture by the Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long for this exegesis of the John 20 text.

I love this scene.

Not so much because Thomas' doubt disappears.

But because God's love pursued Thomas, doubting and unlucky Thomas, until that love caught up with him and captured him and said, "I delight in you. I treasure you. I need you!"

Which is precisely what Jesus is saying to each of you.

"Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus says to Thomas.

"Blessed are those who have not seen
and yet have come to believe."

You know who he's talking about, right?

He's talking about you. He's talking about me.

He's talking about God's church.

Do you think God's Church just might be the FIFTH ACT of Easter?

Imagine something with me.

What would happen if the next watermelon truck that overturns in your life isn't in a story told from this pulpit? What if the truck actually belonged to you?

Of course, you don't have to fill that truck with watermelons.

You could fill it with the love of God, the compassion of God, the mercy of God, the grace of God, the hope of God, the generosity of God...

