

“Seeing Is Believing?”
Acts 2:36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23;
Luke 24:13-35

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How was your week? Just last Sunday, we had an amazing Easter celebration—the trumpet, the handbells, the voices brought excitement to our sanctuary. We exchanged the Easter greeting: He is risen! He is risen indeed! It was a joyful celebration of our faith and good news. That was our gift on Easter morning.

One of my favorite parts of that service is the flowering of the cross. We take that bare wooden cross and make it into a thing of beauty. We took the stark symbol of the crucifixion and transformed it into an incredibly beautiful symbol of the resurrection. We each claim the Easter promise when we put our flower on that cross.

My eyes became very moist when I saw several of our Family Promise guests come forward and join us in flowering the cross. These homeless families had been living in our church that week. We had shared our food, our fellowship, our facilities, and on Sunday morning we shared that moment, the flowering of the cross.

After the service, you may or may not know that we typically take the cross outside and put it on the front steps. We take it out there so the world can see what our great gift has been. We take the flowered cross out there as testimony to our belief in the risen Lord. Now, if you come by church a few days later, that cross will still be out there but the flowers will be looking a little wilted. We put them out there in the world. We put them out there in the weather and they get a little wilted.

On Monday, I went back to work and by mid-week, my Easter flowers had wilted a little bit. I watched the news from South Korea and the Ukraine. I also did some work on Family Promise, and I talked to a few university students about making good choices. I still felt the glow of Easter, but I did go back to the issues that were part of my daily life. Easter had passed.

So, how was your week? How was your week when you went into the world? When you left the sanctuary, did you have moments that reinforced the Easter message, or did you have some moments that perhaps challenged your faith? Did you have some moments that caused you to question that Easter story? Or, was it likely a mix of affirming, but challenging moments?

While we celebrate Easter and Easter morning with great joy, it's easy to forget how hard those days were after Easter for the disciples. On Easter morning they were like us. They were overjoyed with the news, but let's face it, they were also confused. They were confused when they heard the news from Mary Magdalene. The tomb was empty, Christ was risen. It was amazing and frankly unbelievable news for some people. How wonderful and yet how hard to believe. It was painful. It was confusing. Their leader, their friend had died. They were grieving. They may have even feared for their own safety. They were also hurt because their brother Judas had betrayed them and had betrayed Jesus, and he was also dead. In just a couple days their world had turned

upside down. Their triumphal entry into Jerusalem had gone so wrong. It was so overwhelming, and again, so hard to believe.

Each Gospel has an account of those days immediately after Easter. Jesus does appear to his friends and to his disciples, but even when they see him they find it difficult to believe. They find it difficult to believe the message and the promises that had been made before they got to Jerusalem.

In Matthew, Jesus appears to Mary and Mary Magdalene and he says to them, "Peace be with you. Do not be afraid. Tell my brothers to go to Galilee. I will meet them there."

In Luke, there is the account of Jesus appearing to the two travelers going to Emmaus. Jesus walks with them. They do not recognize him. The travelers tell Jesus about the crucifixion and the injustice done in Jerusalem. They invite him to a meal. At the end of the evening he leaves them, and they realize that they have been talking to Jesus. The two travelers immediately go to Jerusalem and tell the disciples what they have seen.

In Mark, there is another description of that same meeting. It's very brief. In this account, it says the travelers go tell the disciples that they have met Jesus and the disciples do not believe them.

Luke goes on to say later that evening Jesus appeared to the disciples and showed them his hands and his feet. They still did not believe. He eventually ate a meal with them to prove that he was not a ghost. He then spent time explaining the scriptures and the events of the past few days.

Then in John, there is the very familiar story of Thomas. Thomas had not been with the disciples earlier in the week when Jesus appeared to them. Thomas did not believe the other disciples. He just couldn't imagine the account that they shared with him. So when Jesus appeared to Thomas, Thomas saw Jesus but still did not believe. Finally, Jesus, with a great deal of patience, said, "Thomas, put your finger here. See my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side, and stop doubting." Thomas touched the wounds and said, "My Lord and my God." But seeing was not enough. Seeing was not believing.

For even Jesus' closest friends, seeing was not automatically believing. Isn't that amazing? Seeing was not believing. On the other hand, had Jesus come to this pulpit last Sunday and you had seen him, what would you believe? I suspect that if he had appeared on Van Buren Street last Sunday, we probably would have had a couple more services to accommodate the crowds. We would have had a parking problem. But we would have still been asking that question: what additional proof do we need to believe? Seeing might not have been believing.

The very last verse in John is interesting. The author says, "Jesus did many other things as well and appeared many times; if every one of them had been written down, I suppose even the whole world would not have had room for the books that would have been written." I, for one, would like one more book.

Jesus understood this was hard to believe. He was patient with his disciples. But then he went on to admonish them. He said, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; but blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed." That's good news for us.

So I return to my opening question. How was your week? Are you still enjoying the glow of Easter or do you need more evidence? Did you leave here last Sunday still needing to put your fingers in his wounds? In a remarkable way, we can find evidence of God's love by touching his wounds and by being touched by his love. We can touch his wounds and see the result of that love because his wounds are everywhere. His wounds are everywhere that people suffer. We can see the evidence of his love when acts of reconciliation and healing are done in his name.

We can touch his wounds when we see homeless and help them act to become independent. We can touch his wounds when we see someone who is grieving a loss and we provide support. We can touch his wounds when we see the hungry and take food to the food bank. We can touch his wounds when we see the devastation of a hurricane and then go to the gulf coast to help put a family's life back together. We can touch his wounds when we see refugees suffering in relocation camps, and can send money through World Vision or UNICEF. You don't have to look very far to see Christ's wounds in the world and then do something in his name to show his love.

On the other hand, we may need evidence of God's love in our lives, in part because of our own pain and our own suffering. Evidence of God's love can come in many forms there, as well. It can come when someone listens to our painful story and is willing to listen to it again, and again, and again. We can experience it when someone lifts a burden off our heavy load and brings food or takes care of our kids when we are sick or exhausted, or just fixes something that has been an incredible worry. We can see evidence of his love when someone agrees to be our Stephen Minister for a period of time. We can see his love when someone becomes our friend just when we need one.

So while part of the Easter story is seeing and believing, it's also a story of feeling and believing. Again, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen me, yet still believe." We have not seen the risen Lord, but the evidence is all around. You can touch his wounds in the world and see healing and peace that can come. We also have evidence of his love when others minister to us.

My own paraphrase of Matthew 25: "Lord, when did I touch your wounds?" He responds, "When you touched those who were wounded." "Lord, when did I feel your presence?" He answers, "When your neighbor took care of you in my name."

I pray that you have a good week and that you see and feel the evidence that you need so that you can celebrate the good news of Easter. I would like to close with the words from Martin Luther:

Live as if Christ died yesterday, rose this morning, and is coming back tomorrow.

Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!