

Easter 2 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 11, 2021

John 20:19-31; 1 John 1:1– 2:2

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

When I was in high school English, we read Shakespeare. “Romeo and Juliet” when we were freshmen, “Julius Caesar” for sophomores, and “Hamlet” in our senior year. One of the things that we learned about was something called “the aside.” When a character on stage, turns to the audience and makes a remark intended for them. It’s not part of the dialog onstage. It’s a special message directly to the audience.

Well, our reading today ends with an aside. First, in the words of Jesus: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* Jesus is formally speaking to Thomas. But he is talking about the audience. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* When you hear those words in church, you are supposed to poke the person sitting next to you. “He’s talking about us, Jerry. Jesus is talking about us.”

On the Sunday after Easter each year, we read these last thirteen verses of John chapter twenty, what most scholars believe was the original ending of John, before another chapter, chapter twenty-one, was later added on. But we read it every year on the eighth day of Easter. And as we reach this first ending of John, Jesus speaks to Thomas, but he talks to us over Thomas’ head. *Have you believed because you have seen me, Thomas? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

And then in case we missed that, the author himself pivots to us and addresses us directly in the second person plural. “Ye” in the King James translation. The second person plural, “Y’all” in the South, “Ye” in King James English. *But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.* So here, the author that we call John is addressing *US*, the assembled church gathered after the death of the apostles. After the death of the people who knew Jesus and saw Jesus. This gospel recognizes that the time will come when the Twelve will all be dead. Mary Magdalene, and Martha of Bethany, and Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman will all be dead. When the author himself will be dead. When everyone who personally interacted with Jesus on earth would no longer be on earth, either.

They all saw, and they believed. But the book realizes that you and I will be hearing this story. Our second reading, also called John, the first letter of John, states: *What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the*

word of life. They saw with their own eyes, and believed. We have not seen with our own eyes. Will we believe?

What John is referring to is not specifically the resurrected Christ Jesus. John is referring to the whole kit and caboodle of the fourth gospel. *These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* These things— a lot of teachings, as well as a lot of miracles, and a lot of relationships with different kinds of people— these things are written, so that you and I who have not seen with our own eyes, may come to believe. And by believing, may come to have life.

John hopes that his book—we're talking about the gospel— will be compelling. And that's one way that you and I, who have not seen, can come to believe. I'm going to mention three ways that you and I believe. One of them is the compelling nature of what has been shared. A second one is the cloud of witnesses. And the third one is the necessity of belief. John's gospel is hoping that you will find what he shares compelling enough to believe. To invest your trust and your self in Jesus as he is presented in this book.

When I say compelling, I mean, for example, that the disciples cannot recognize Jesus until they see his wounds. That tells you that this is more than a contrived miracle. It's not facial recognition. It's not photographic memory. It's the signs of self-sacrificial love, in the hands and the side of Jesus from his crucifixion. That's one of many ways that the fourth gospel subverts the conventions of magic and superstition and wishful thinking. Whatever Jesus is, he is something more than wish-fulfillment. John thinks that you and I might find all of this compelling.

You might find the gospel of John compelling. Or it might be some other book of the Bible, or some aspect of the Christian church, or some kind of personal experience that you have had. Those are the compelling ways that people might come to believe. Even though we have not seen with our own eyes and touched with our own hands. Compelled, persuaded, spoken to. Out of this religion, something addresses you. Jesus calls his sheep by name, in the words of this very gospel.

But there's another way that some of us come to believe, even though we have not seen like Thomas. That's the cloud of witnesses, a New Testament phrase that describes the faith of others. *THEY* found power and truth that *THEY* could believe. And you or I might find that their witness speaks to us. The three largest influences on my belief have been my parents, my grandparents, and my pastors. They are the ones who raised me as a Christian. They are the ones whose faith I desired even when I did not have it myself. I once knew a guy who joined my home congregation in Houston not because he was sure about Jesus Christ, but because he was sure about Johann Sebastian Bach. The music witnessed to Christ. Bach's testimony was trustworthy. That's what the cloud of witnesses means. In today's gospel, Thomas does *not* believe the cloud of witnesses. His fellow apostles, some of whom surely were his close friends, gave him testimony that he rejected. So we don't believe everyone. But sometimes we know and trust certain people, and their witness touches us, and lifts us, even when we may be uncertain or

uneasy about the principal doctrines and precepts of Christianity. That's okay. *Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.*

And there's another way that some of us come to believe. That's by necessity. In life, there are things that cannot be understood. In life, we cling to truths that cannot be proven. If life were a jigsaw puzzle, we would find an empty space for which we lack the pieces. And the God of Christianity can fill that space and complete the picture for us. Even though we might not have originally set out on a quest to find God. At different stages of life, one might be okay with that big empty space. At different stages of life, one might try forcing the puzzle pieces to work together. At some stages of life, it is simpler and more obvious to accept that God is the missing piece. The triune God— who creates us and the world, who redeems us from the mistakes we make, and who offers living guidance and companionship— the triune God is sometimes something we accept as a necessity even when we lack the evidence, the proof, or the logic. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

It was on Easter Day that Jesus appeared to ten of the disciples in a locked room. They told Thomas, but he did not believe them. On the eighth day— one week after Easter Sunday— Jesus appeared again, and this time Thomas saw him. This is the prototype for Sunday worship. We gather together, and the living Christ Jesus appears. Or maybe he appears and we don't recognize him. Or maybe he appears and we don't believe. But the gospel message today says: *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.* Even though we are not Mary Magdalene or Peter or Thomas, the gospel message today says that these things are for us, too. Belief is for us, too. Life in his name is for us, too. Amen.