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Seeing is Believing¹

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Text: John 20:19-31

Introduction

On Thomas Sunday, the Sunday following Orthodox Easter, in the Spring of 1985, a young Canadian peacekeeper stationed in the Golan Heights heard today's Gospel passage intoned while attending the Divine Liturgy at an Orthodox Church. The peacekeeper stood nervously in his dress-green uniform, occasionally fingering the gunbelt he was ordered to wear. At that time, United Nations peacekeeping forces were stationed in this small volatile region of Israel, extending between the Northeastern bank of the Sea of Galilee to the Syrian border. Israeli forces and Arab-Islamic terrorist factions were frequently engaged in skirmishes, and often the local Arabic Orthodox Christian communities were caught in the crossfire. Despite the jubilant feeling of the worshippers, the tension in the air was unmistakable.

The Liturgy ends. The young peacekeeper departs the church, donning his crisp-new, powder-blue U.N. beret. Suddenly there are screams from the crowd of Christian congregants, gathered in fellowship in front of the church. He hears the characteristic "pop-pop-pop" of small arms fire. Feeling fear and excitement boiling up in his stomach, the peacekeeper moves quickly through the jostling crowd, stepping over wounded casualties lying still or writhing in agony on the cobblestones. He cannot quite believe what he is seeing. The gunshots continue their staccato barking, as the wails of pain and terror increase. The air is thick with the acrid smells of gunsmoke, blood, and human fear, obscenely profaning the lingering sweet fragrance of incense.

Finally, the peacekeeper breaks through the frantically-escaping mass of people, and draws his pistol from its decorative white-leather holster. What he sees shocks him, and causes him to hesitate: two young boys, dressed in the clothing of Palestinian Moslems, perhaps thirteen and fifteen years of age, are the attackers. Each is firing an AK-47 into the throng of Palestinian Christians – their ethnic cousins – later it would be reported that eleven had been killed and thirty-four wounded in this senseless act of violence.

The peacekeeper holds up his left hand and points his pistol with his right, yelling at the boys to stop. The elder boy aims his rifle at the soldier, and fires a single shot. The peacekeeper feels a burning thud strike his upheld wrist – without thinking, he fires his pistol at the teen, killing him instantly with a shot to the head. The younger boy, his brother by appearances, loses his courage and drops his rifle. For a brief moment, the man and the boy stare at each other – the man's face filled with pain and anger, the boy's face crumpling with grief and fright. The young officer lowers his weapon, and the boy, glancing mournfully at the ruined face of his brother, turns and runs.

The peacekeeper, shock building within him, turns to tend the wounded. His blood mingles with theirs on the churchyard cobblestones. Shrieking sirens signal the arrival of help – the peacekeeper's throbbing, broken wrist is quickly bandaged. He is whisked from the site of the massacre back to the U.N. compound, where he is locked alone in a secure trailer. Already the Islamic terrorist authorities have put a price on his head. As he sits in the locked trailer awaiting evacuation, fearing for his life and suffering waves of nearly-unbearable pain, all he can see in his mind's eye is the face of the young boy whose brother he has killed. Mindful of the sacramental body and blood of Christ still in his stomach, the peacekeeper wonders if God will ever forgive him for taking the life of a child. His fear and guilt motivate him to look for a sign of God's grace, so that he might be at peace. Seeing is believing, and our young soldier, trapped in his locked room, sees no way to escape the horror of this day.

Trouble in the Text

In the wake of the horror of the crucifixion, Jesus' disciples were also locked in a room in great fear. Fear for their lives, since the authorities may have sought to round up the followers of the troublemaking Nazarene.

Filled with guilt for having run in the hour of Jesus' need. In their mind's eye is the face of their Teacher, lost to them.

The chamber is quiet, as they speak in subdued voices. The sun peeks through the cracks in the shuttered windows, illuminating the dust motes in the dim, dark room. The heat is oppressive, and the place smells of sweat and fear. None of the disciples can bring themselves to look one another in the eyes. The gloom casts its shadow on all in the room, as they bleakly ponder what the future may hold for them. Then, suddenly, despite the locked doors and shuttered windows, the room brightens. Jesus stands in their midst, calling them to peace. He has risen!

Thomas wasn't there that day. You remember Thomas, ever the practical pessimist. Even before the Lord came into Jerusalem, Thomas saw the writing on the wall. When Jesus and his disciples went to Bethany to mourn the death of Lazarus, Thomas was there. Remember how he grumpily said, "Let us go and die with him."

Thomas wasn't too happy with Jesus. First of all, Jesus had appointed that thief Judas as treasurer, knowing that Judas was embezzling funds. Sure enough, Judas had shown his true colours when he betrayed Jesus for money. Secondly, the "new kingdom" that Jesus had promised certainly wasn't going to happen now. Thomas had hoped to be a cabinet minister, or gain some position for himself in the new regime. All his life people just called him "the twin" – by some unlucky twist of fate, his elder brother, born only minutes before Thomas, got his own name and was heir to what little their parents owned. Thomas grew up in someone else's shadow – someone who looked just like him, but had everything, while Thomas was just "the twin".

So, when Thomas met Jesus, he saw his chance. Perhaps he could make a name for himself with this new movement. But now it was all over – Jesus had been executed as a criminal, and Thomas had to go back to being a nobody.

Now these other crazy followers of Jesus were trying to tell Thomas that their Lord was alive, that he had risen from his tomb. "Right!" says Thomas. He was nobody's fool. "Unless I can see him and touch his wounds, forget about it." For Thomas, seeing is believing.

Trouble in Our World

“Seeing is believing” is a common enough viewpoint. Many modern theologians say basically the same thing when they deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. Nothing in our visible experience of life permits us to believe that an organism, once dead, can become alive again. Some of these theologians, wanting to maintain their Christian faith, posit that the Risen Christ was a “spook”, a ghostly apparition. Others try to convince us that the New Testament community “felt Jesus in their hearts”, and made up the resurrection accounts to symbolically explain something that they all believed to be true at a “deeper” level.

Today’s lection plainly shows that the disciples were not all so credulous. Thomas is the voice of our empirical age – he demands physical proof. For him, seeing is believing, but he wants tactile evidence as well – he needs to touch his Lord’s identifying wounds to believe that it is really Jesus. Clearly the experience of the Risen Christ transformed the disciples from living in fear in a locked room, to become the apostolic community, preaching the Good News throughout the known world and beyond. It was the *experience* of the Risen Christ that mattered to them, not the theory of how he could have risen in the first place. For the disciples, *seeing* the Risen Christ *was believing* in him.

The experience of the Risen Christ is not always so easy for us to see in the world today. I think of Kosovo last Eastertide, when NATO was bombing Yugoslavia back into the Stone Age. At that time, certain nominal Christians were deporting and killing Moslems, while certain nominal Moslems were burning and destroying churches and monasteries, killing anyone who resisted. In the midst of all this chaos, faithful Christians were trying to celebrate the Feast of Christ’s Resurrection, while fire rained down upon them from the heavens. For these Christians, locked in their churches, who could not see the face of the Risen Christ clearly through the smoke and pain of war, belief was solely based on what others had seen. This belief gave them hope that Christ would come and bring them peace. “Blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe.”

Grace in the Text

Again, we find our community of early Christians gathered together in a locked room. This time Thomas is with them, certainly skeptical,

but likely hopeful at some level that he might be proved wrong in his doubts. Suddenly, Jesus is again in their midst, calling them to peace. A week prior he had exhaled upon them the gift of his Holy Breath – only a living being has breath – and ordained them for God’s mission of healing the broken world. Now they are gathered in expectant anticipation – the room is no longer gloomy, even if the disciples still fear arrest. All of them are staring at Thomas; hoping, praying...*willing* him to believe.

Thomas stands agape – he sees, but his mind cannot process the image. Jesus gives him one of those looks that Thomas remembers so well – a look filled with love, understanding, patience and gentle determination. Seeing is believing, and impossibly, Jesus stands before him. Jesus knows Thomas’ doubts, his desire to believe, his lack of purposeful identity. Jesus sees all that and believes in Thomas. Jesus gestures to him; invites Thomas to touch his hands, his side, “Be not unbelieving, but believing,” Jesus says.

All Thomas’ doubts fade away. His lack of personal purpose now seems trite and self-centred. Before him is the miracle of his Teacher, his leader, his friend – still bearing the marks of death, yet living. Thomas’ shame and pessimism dissolve into awe and wonder. He falls to his knees, his lips move and he confesses, “My Lord and my God!” The twin has found his name, his inheritance, his purpose in the person of the Risen Christ. Seeing is believing! Thomas sees, and his belief transforms him. Christ reveals himself to Thomas, and Thomas is fulfilled. Jesus tells him, “You believe because you see, blessed are those who do not see and yet believe.” The disciples are now empowered by their Faith to witness to the Resurrection of the Lord. The Church is born; new life from death, new hope from despair, new belief from doubt.

Grace in our World

Some misguided pastors of the Church have attacked doubt as a sin against God. Yet, Thomas’ doubt laid the groundwork for a lively, transforming faith – a Faith that would lead Thomas to evangelize India and obtain a martyr’s crown. Our doubt awakens us from dogmatic slumbers, and motivates us to look for the presence of the living Christ in the world. It was in Christ’s woundedness that he revealed himself to Thomas, and it is in the woundedness of others that we can often experience Christ in our midst.

At the Paschal Vigil last Spring, while our Christian brothers and sisters in Yugoslavia cringed in their churches as fire was rained down upon them, a different kind of fire was being kindled in Jerusalem. There, in the great church of the Holy Sepulchre, built by Emperor Constantine the Great in the fourth century, thousands of expectant Christian faithful, interspersed with dozens of curious Moslem onlookers, awaited the toll of midnight.

The church is in near-darkness; all of the oil lamps and candles remain unlit. As the sacred time approaches, the elderly Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, clad resplendently in his shining vestments, slowly descends into the tomb of Christ. A few hushed moments later, an otherworldly glow is sparked in the depths of the tomb. Its green-white rays fire out into the dark church, illuminating the glorious frescos. The crowd's breath is caught in awe. Suddenly, the Holy Fire is seen moving like glowing fireflies, playfully dancing out of the tomb, lighting the oil lamps over the iconostasis and the candles in everyone's hands. Within moments, the whole church is ablaze with brilliant radiance, and the people exultantly chant the ancient Pascal hymn:

Christ is Risen from the dead! Having trampled death by death!
And unto those in the tombs, having life bestowed!

Christians and Moslems stand together, laughing and marvelling at the unexpected grace of God. Seeing is believing, and despite their doubts and differences, the faithful in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre experience the peace of the Risen Christ.

Conclusion

Remember our young peacekeeper? Well, a year passes for him, and he finds himself working as an ambulance attendant in Toronto. Each morning he awakens in a cold sweat, seeing before him the accusing face of the young boy whose brother he has killed. He has drifted from his church, despairing of God's forgiveness. Then, one morning in the Easter season, he is called to the scene of a traffic accident. A young boy has been struck by a car. On arrival, the young paramedic bends over the boy to examine his wounds. He looks at the boy's face, and his heart catches. It cannot be! The boy's eyes flicker open momentarily. The two stare at each other in fear and mutual recognition. The boy's expression changes from troubled and terror-stricken to pain-filled and

pleading. In shock and wonder, the paramedic falls to his knees, his lips moving soundlessly: "My Lord and my God!" In treating the wounds of the boy he had wounded, the young man feels God's grace again. Seeing is believing. Seeing is believing, and for our young soldier-cum-healer, the presence of the Risen Christ is revealed in the innocent face of a wounded enemy.

We too can experience the Risen Christ in the woundedness of others. God raises us from the tombs of guilt and despair. Christ offers us his Risen presence in the faces of the hurting. Seeing is believing, and we see the Resurrected Lord all around us. He breathes on us and ordains us for God's mission to heal the broken world. When we touch and tend the physical, spiritual, and emotional wounds of the needy – the young, the poor, the sick, the old – Christ reveals himself to us. Our response is that of Thomas and the young paramedic: "My Lord and my God!" And like them, we are empowered by the Risen Lord to bring the Good News of healing to others. Therefore, when we see someone who is hurting, see Christ in the woundedness. Seeing is believing.

Note

- ¹ This sermon was prepared by Archbishop Andrei in the autumn of 1999 while he was a graduate student in theology at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary. The sermon was a requirement for a preaching course taught by Dr. David S. Jacobsen, Assistant Professor of Homiletics at WLS, and follows loosely the homiletical model presented by Paul Scott Wilson in *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).