

*“Believe without Seeing”*

**This Scripture continues the theme of Jesus’ Resurrection and it has three sections:**

- ▶ **The first part is about the Risen Jesus appearing to ten of his original disciples on the first Easter.**
- ▶ **The second portion relates to Thomas not believing Jesus appeared to those ten of his original disciples on the first Easter.**
- ▶ **The final section sums up the purpose for the writing about the signs of Jesus’ miracles in the Gospel of John.**

During the Sunrise Service last Sunday, we looked at how the Risen Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdalene and then, she told the disciples about her experience. Unfortunately, the disciples did not believe her and they continued to hide from the authorities behind locked doors. Today’s Scripture reminds us how our Risen Lord appeared to them, while the doors were still locked! They were very afraid they would suffer the same treatment Jesus experienced. It was certainly very unsettling for them to have someone or something sneak into the locked room in which they gathered.

Jesus sought to comfort them and to relieve their fears by saying in **verse 19b**, *“Peace be with you!”* – *“Shalom!”* He showed them the wounds in his hands and side. Somehow, Jesus’ dead body with its injuries was present with them in the locked up room and he was talking to them! We are told in **verse 20b**, *“The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord.”* It might be more honest to say they were awed – filled with wonder. That condition has a strange mixture of joy, hope, reverence, and fear.

Jesus told the ten in verse 21 he was sending them out to humanity as God had sent him. **Verses 22-23** tell us *“he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people’s sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.’”*

Through that action and those words, Jesus indicated he was giving his disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Authority to declare the forgiveness of sins. Some have understood that to mean those ordained through apostolic succession have the authority to forgive. However, another way of understanding Jesus’ gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Authorization to forgive is to recognize no one would be aware they are forgiven unless and until someone announces that Good News to them! **We are all forgiven – everyone!** But, that fact does not change our daily lives and expectations, if a person is unaware of being forgiven. You or I do not obtain forgiveness for ourselves by confessing our sins. Yet, in order for the full power and meaning of our being forgiven to create our transformation – to give us joy and hope, a forgiven person needs awareness of the magnitude of God’s Graciousness – to recognize the true extent of our brokenness and alienation from God and one another without our Divine Parent’s Forgiveness. Therefore, if you or I are either unaware of or refuse to acknowledge how unworthy we are to receive **God’s Unconditional and Total Self – Giving “Agape” Love and Forgiveness**, then we do not fully grasp the meaning of God’s Forgiveness – we shut ourselves off from its power to enable our Transformation and New Life in Christ.

The disciple, Thomas, missed that visitation by the Risen Jesus on the first Easter night. The second part of today’s Reading reports how those ten witnesses of the Risen Lord informed Thomas of what had happened but he refused to believe! That means he denied himself the positive and appropriate reception of the Good News of God’s Victory over death in Jesus’ Resurrection, as well as, the transforming power of the Divine Parent’s Gift of Love and Forgiveness. As I stated a few moments ago, being forgiven makes no difference in a person’s life, if the individual either does not hear or read this Good News or refuses to receive it. So, Thomas’ negative response to the report he received from the ten disciples, who saw and heard the Risen Lord Jesus, illustrates my previous interpretation of what Jesus Christ meant when he gave us the Authority to declare people’s forgiveness. By rejecting the other disciples’ report of the Risen Lord, Thomas did not allow himself to receive the power of that Good News!

Instead of benefiting from that Good News, Thomas demanded proof and said in **verse 25b**, *“Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those scars and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”*

We can be sure Thomas did not see his demands as being unreasonable, for he was asking no more than what the other ten disciples claimed they had experienced. After all, the others had not believed Mary Magdalene – they were no better than him! They were unable to dissuade Thomas from his line of thinking.

However, Jesus made another visit to his original disciples a week later and Thomas was present. Again, Jesus appeared in a room with locked doors and continued to seek to comfort the awestruck disciples by saying in **verse 26, “Peace be with you.”** Responding to Thomas’ doubt – his refusal to accept Mary Magdalene’s or the other ten disciples’ testimonies, **Jesus said in verse 27, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands; then reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop your doubting, and believe!”**

Seeing the Risen Son of God for himself, Thomas turned away from his doubts and declared in **verse 28, “My Lord and my God!”** Now, Thomas was just like the rest of the original disciples! He had seen his Risen Lord. Even though Thomas had not been present when the Risen Jesus Christ gave his disciples the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Authority to declare people’s forgiveness, he was also given the Holy Spirit and the Authority to declare forgiveness! **You and I – even Christians before us and those after us are also given the Holy Spirit and the Call to declare forgiveness.**

Jesus made an important point for the future, saying in **vs. 29, “Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!”** By saying that, Jesus made a promise for later followers. They, also, will be able to receive the gift of Faith – to **“believe without seeing”** the Risen Jesus Christ! They and we would be able to believe in Jesus as the Risen Messiah – the Son of God, even though we have not seen him for ourselves – **“believe without seeing”**. **Since that is the case, we are also given the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Authority to declare and inform all people they have been given the gift of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial “Agape” Love and Forgiveness!**

The author of the Gospel of John concluded today’s Reading with a description of the Gospel of John’s purpose for describing Jesus’ miracles, which is very much in line with enabling us to **“believe without seeing”**. The Gospel of John states in **verses 30-31, “In his disciples’ presence Jesus performed many other miracles which are not written down in this book. But these have been written in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through your faith in him you may have life.”**

Many biblical scholars believe the Gospel of John most likely originally concluded with those words in verses 30-31. However, I have come to recognize Chapter 21 is not just an added report of another appearance of the Risen Jesus Christ, along with information intended to bolster the validity of the gospel’s author’s testimony. Instead, **I agree with Dr. Richard Bauckham’s conclusion in his more recent book, The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple, saying, “that chapter 21 is an integral part of the design of the whole gospel.”** Further, Bauckham points out the last few verses of today’s Reading serve as the conclusion of the Gospel of John’s presentation of the signs, which show **“Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,”** while chapter 21 is the end of the gospel itself.

Our Scripture Reading today calls us to remember the witness of the early Church. It reminds us of our need to believe in our Risen Savior. It confirms the miracles revealed Jesus’ relationship with God and with us. **It Calls us to pass on the ancient testimony of Jesus being the Revealed and Risen Messiah and Son of God, so others, who cannot see him, will come to believe and thus have the true Life, which belongs to those who “believe without seeing” the Risen Jesus Christ and are thus, reconciled with God and one another through God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial “Agape” Love and Forgiveness. Be bold in declaring this truth and in the living of the New Life of God’s “Agape” Love and Forgiveness! Amen.**