

Easter 2 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

“You’ve got to see it to believe it.” We use this phrase often to describe anything from the uncommon to the miraculous. If we’re watching a late night infomercial an energetic man who seems to care a lot about the state of our laundry might shout out “you’ve got to see it to believe it” to describe the amazing stain-fighting power of the product he is trying to sell. A friend may tell us “you’ve got to see it to believe it” when describing footage of an airline passenger getting kicked off of a plane. Sometimes the person using this phrase literally wants you to witness whatever event they are describing. Buy this product so you can see its stain-busting power for yourself! Watch this crazy video of this man being dragged off a plane! But sometimes this phrase is used, not because we literally want someone to take a look at whatever we’re describing, but so they might understand just how miraculous an event we witnessed seemed to be. If someone is describing the astounding recovery of a family member recuperating from a stroke, they may tell their friend, “you’ve got to see it to believe it,” but they wouldn’t expect their friend to drop everything they were doing to come visit Aunt Eileen and view her amazing recovery for themselves.

We might imagine that Jesus’ disciples used a similar phrase when talking about seeing Christ in the resurrected flesh. Even though they had heard from Mary Magdalene that Christ had been resurrected, and even though Peter could corroborate the fact that Christ’s tomb was empty, the disciples still seemed to have their doubts as to whether or not Christ had truly been raised. So even though Christ had commanded them to spread the good news of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, after Christ’s death we find them holed up in a locked house for fear of the Jewish authorities who had helped arrange for Christ’s execution. They had seen Christ die—they did not want to end up in the same boat. And so they hid in some undisclosed location, waiting for the heat to die down so that they might once again walk around in public without fear. It is here that the resurrected Christ chooses to appear to his disciples after his initial meeting with Mary Magdalene. He somehow enters into the locked house undetected, and shows the disciples his hands and his side which had been pierced to prove his identity to them. Immediately after this the disciples recognize Christ and rejoice. But Christ isn’t there so that the disciples might celebrate his resurrection. He reminds them of the duty which had been given to them, which they had been neglecting due to their fear. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

Though most of the disciples were present for this message, Thomas was missing. He was not cowering in the locked house. Though we are not told exactly what he was up to, he apparently continued to live openly in the world, refusing to hide from the authorities who had condemned Jesus to death. This is not surprising when we consider how Thomas reacted to threat of mortal danger, as we heard in the Gospel a few weeks ago. When Jesus told the disciples of his plans to travel to Bethany after Lazarus’ death, the other disciples tried to convince Christ to stay away from the place for fear that the Jewish authorities may try to kill them. But Thomas does not react as the other disciples react. Instead he convinces the others to accompany Jesus in spite of the dangers saying, “Let us go also that we might die with him.” So it comes as no surprise that while the other disciples are in hiding, fear of death has not affected Thomas and how he is choosing to live his life.

Yet when the other disciples tell Thomas about their encounter with the risen Christ, Thomas reacts in a way that we might not expect. We can almost imagine how this conversation played out—the terrified but excited disciples running to Thomas to tell him of Christ’s resurrection—how they themselves had witnessed Christ’s resurrected body, nail marks and spear scars and all. “You’ve got to see it to believe it!” And Thomas DOES want to see it. He wants to witness what the other disciples

have witnessed himself. And so he tells them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas' reaction leaves us wondering: has the same Thomas who was willing to die for Christ BEFORE his resurrection had a sudden change of heart? Considering he was not hiding with the rest of the disciples, that seems unlikely. Perhaps it is not Christ that Thomas was speaking of when he refused to believe, but the idea that Christ had shown himself to the other disciples. Perhaps Thomas found it hard to believe that the risen Christ would show himself to the disciples cowering in a locked house before appearing to the disciple who was continuing to live out in the world, unafraid.

Whatever his reasoning, we know that Thomas was dead-set on seeing Christ himself. And so, a week later, he is with the disciples in the house. And Christ does, indeed, appear again. He shows Thomas the marks in his hands and in his side and Thomas immediately reacts with a declaration of faith: "My Lord and my God!" And Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Many often view this exchange as a condemnation of Thomas, but that's not necessarily the case. Christ was not accusing Thomas, but was merely questioning—and it seems unlikely that the same Thomas who refused to abandon Christ, even under threat of death, would have suddenly lost his faith. But Christ often taught messages to some so that they might be passed on to others. It is the latter part of the exchange between Christ and Thomas that is most important—"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Though Christ was leaving the disciples with the gift of the Holy Spirit, he knew that it would soon come time for him to ascend into heaven, where he would remain until the appointed time to usher in God's kingdom. And Christ would have known that it would be impossible for all of his followers to see his resurrected body in the flesh. They would not have the opportunity to see Christ in order that they might believe. And this applies to us as well. Though we can buy the infomercial detergent to see its stain-fighting power for ourselves, and we can hop onto the internet to find the video of the man being dragged off of an overbooked flight, we cannot see the risen Christ with our own eyes until he comes to this earth once more.

Just as when we believe our friend's assessment of their aunt's near-miraculous recovery from her stroke, not because we've seen Aunt Eileen with our own eyes, but because we trust our friend, so we come to believe in the risen Christ, not because we have seen him ourselves, but because we trust in the testimony of those who HAD seen him. We trust in the testimony of those disciples who, though they were so fearful after Christ's death that they locked themselves away in a hidden house, began to renew their efforts to spread the Gospel after they had seen the resurrected Lord—even though it would cost most of them their lives. We trust in the testimony of Thomas, whose faith in Christ was so steadfast that he was willing to risk death even before Christ's resurrection, and who immediately declared Christ to be his Lord and his God after. We believe in the accounts of these faithful saints, who though they had seemingly abandoned the work of Christ after his death, steadfastly spread his message until their own deaths after having been transformed through their interactions with Christ after he was raised from the dead. These testimonies are written in scripture so that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name. As the writer of 1 John states, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, 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— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." Let us trust in these testimonies. Amen.