

## **Easter People: Believing Without Seeing** Sunday, 5/8/22

Last week we looked at the difficult side of resurrection, revisiting the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to Peter on the beach. Peter serves as a model for us all in his need to be reborn in his faith after his repeated denial of Jesus. We also read of the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples on the mountain near Galilee, recalling that resurrection comes with expectations. Easter People are called to take up the mission of the risen Christ by making new disciples. Today, we'll look at more post-resurrection appearances of Jesus as we wrestle with the challenge of believing without seeing. Earlier we heard Luke's account of the revelation of the risen Jesus to the men from Emmaus and then later, to the disciples in Jerusalem. Our second reading is John's account of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in Jerusalem. I'm reading from chapter 20, beginning with verse 19 in the New Living Translation. **{Read John 20:19-20, 24-29 NLT}**

With all of these different accounts of Jesus appearing after his resurrection, it can get a little confusing. If we wanted to make one whole picture out of the different Gospel accounts, it might look something like this. On Easter Sunday, Jesus first appeared to the two Marys outside of the tomb and then, according to Luke, he appeared separately to Peter and to the men from Emmaus. That Sunday evening, Jesus appeared to the frightened disciples in the upper room, and eight days later he appeared again, this time including Thomas. We're not sure of the timing of his appearance to Peter and the others on the beach in John or his appearance to the disciples on the mountain at the end of Matthew. Paul writes in this first letter to the Corinthians that Jesus also "was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, ...James," and last of all Paul himself.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these encounters were marked by fear, confusion, and doubt, despite the physical manifestation of an embodied Jesus and his admonition to not be afraid. If it was that difficult for so many eyewitnesses to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, how are we to believe, who are two thousand years separated from the events of that first Easter Sunday?

Almost the first words of Jesus to the disciples in Luke 24 are "Why are you frightened?" and "Why are your hearts filled with doubt?"<sup>2</sup> Matthew writes of the disciples

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<sup>1</sup> 1Corinthians 15:6-7. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

<sup>2</sup> Luke 24:38. Ibid

meeting Jesus on the mountain, “When they saw him, they worshiped him—but some of them doubted!”<sup>3</sup> But it’s in John’s account of Thomas that we see the issue of doubt brought into sharpest focus, when Jesus says to Thomas, “Don’t be faithless any longer. Believe!”<sup>4</sup> Thomas immediately responds with the answer that we hope we’d all have for Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”<sup>5</sup> To which Jesus offers this provocative teaching: “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.”<sup>6</sup>

Really? We’re blessed because we haven’t seen Jesus? What a very counter-intuitive thing to say, especially in today’s world that is so steeped in multi-media and so highly values the eyewitness testimony of body cameras, dash cams, surveillance footage, and bystander videos. And yet, it remains one of the central paradoxes of the Christian faith that we believe without seeing. Easter People believe in the reality and power of the risen Christ, even though they have not stood before him and seen the nail marks in his hands. Do you?

Hebrews 11 is one of the most celebrated passages on faith in our Bible, with the thesis of the entire chapter summed up in the very first verse: “Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.”<sup>7</sup> That sounds a bit like one of those aphorisms that we see in internet memes, so let’s see if we can come to a better understanding of what it really means.

The author of Hebrews substantiates his thesis with a lengthy roll call of Old Testament heroes who all “died believing what God had promised them”<sup>8</sup> despite not having seen it. For example, Moses never set foot in the promised land, but he still pressed on in obedience, believing that the promised land would become a reality for his people.

Let’s see if we can apply this to the promises of Easter. What is the Easter reality that we hope for? What is the Easter evidence that we can’t see? Starting with the most obvious, none of us saw the crucified body of Jesus, either on the cross or in the tomb. None of us saw the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. None of us were able to watch Jesus eat a

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<sup>3</sup> Mathew 28:17. Ibid

<sup>4</sup> John 20:27. Ibid

<sup>5</sup> John 20:28. Ibid

<sup>6</sup> John 20:29. Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 11:1. Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 11:13. Ibid

broiled fish to convince us that he wasn't a ghost.

If none of us has seen those things, then where is the evidence? The author of Hebrews tells us that faith itself “is the evidence of things we cannot see.”<sup>9</sup> How can faith be the evidence we need? We find our evidence in faith because we choose to trust what's been handed down to us in the inspired Word of God and the teachings of generations of Christians who came before us. We choose faith over sight to meet the burden of proof.

There's a reason we sometimes call this a “leap of faith.” The idea of taking a leap into Christian belief was central to the writings of philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who saw the many paradoxes of Christianity as resisting an overly reflective and scientific analysis.<sup>10</sup> I, for one, have no problem reconciling my modern ideas about science with the Biblical witness, but scientific analysis is not at all how I came to know Christ. Despite all my training and degrees, it was the authentic witness of a church body that convinced me, infused with a healthy dose of preaching, prayer, and Bible study. I found my evidence in the faith lived out by a church community, which is why it's absolutely essential for me to continue to be a part of one. But I'm getting ahead of myself. We'll talk about Easter People as the Body of Christ in a few weeks.

If faith is our evidence of the resurrection, then what is the reality we hope for as Easter People? Certainly, we all hope to receive a resurrection body when our current bodies die and we stand before Jesus, face to face. But what we hope for exceeds that hope of eternal life, as great as it is. We hope for a resurrection life that begins today and continues until the final resurrection and the consummation of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. What might that look like? What kind of life should we be hopeful for today?

If you're hoping for a more comfortable recliner, I suppose that might be in your future, but it's hardly the kind of hope that makes us Easter People. Remember, what we hope for in this life must be rooted in the life of Jesus and the Holy Spirit who was sent to guide us in his place. Here are just a few of the Scriptural images of what Easter People should be hoping for in this life.

Paul writes that to rise with Christ in this life is to be made free by grace. “So Christ

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<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 11:1. Ibid

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leap\\_of\\_faith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leap_of_faith)

has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law."<sup>11</sup> Easter People embrace the New Covenant of grace offered to us through the body and blood of Christ, free to receive and offer grace by the power and leading of God's Holy Spirit.

John notes that to rise with Christ in this life is to live without fear of God's judgement. "And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world."<sup>12</sup> Easter People live in the joy of God's grace, not in the fear of God's anger.

Paul also writes that we are made new when we rise with our risen savior. "Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"<sup>13</sup> Easter People embrace a fresh start in life whenever they embrace their faith in the One who is making them new each day.

When we rise with Christ in this life, we embrace the life of the Spirit, including the fruit of the Spirit, such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>14</sup> Easter people hope for these fruit to be abundant in their lives, because they know the promises of the one who sent the Spirit are good.

How about you? What are you hoping for that faith can show you the reality of? Are you in bondage to something other than Christ? Faith in the risen Jesus can free you. Are you living in fear of something? Pray that God will increase your faith. Do you feel saddled with a past that seems to inescapably define your future? Jesus offers to make you into a new creation. Are you constantly falling short of the expectations you have for yourself, never measuring up to God's standards? Jesus wants you to let go and let his Holy Spirit bear his fruit in your life.

Easter People aren't perfect, but we put our faith in the one who was, is, and always will be. We let our faith serve as the evidence of what we can't see, and let our faith show us the reality of what we hope for.

Please take some time now to reflect on your faith. What reality do you need to see by

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<sup>11</sup> Galatians 5:1. Ibid

<sup>12</sup> 1John 4:17. Ibid

<sup>13</sup> 2Corinthians 5:17. Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Galatians 5:22-23. Ibid

faith rather than your eyes?



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