

SEEING AND BELIEVING

[Three Morons Joke] {*editor's insert: for those who were not at the service (and for those old enough to remember back when moron was a politically acceptable term:}* 3 morons were discussing how to celebrate the Easter holiday. The 1st one said, "Easter is a holiday where everyone gives thanks and families get together for a big turkey dinner, and it usually falls on Thursday." The 2nd one said "no, you moron, Easter is when you decorate a pine tree with lights and exchange lots of gifts." The 3rd one said "no, you're both morons, it's when Jesus was buried in a tomb on Friday, they rolled a big stone in front of it and sealed it, and then on Sunday Jesus came out of the tomb...and then saw his shadow, so he went back in and they had 6 more weeks of winter."

Obviously I like jokes. When I was a kid I used to like to take familiar sayings and turn them around. "Time heals all wounds" became "time wounds all heels." "Necessity is the mother of invention" became "Mother is the inventor of necessity." My mom really liked that one. Ben Franklin's old saying became, "Early to bed, early to rise and your gal goes out with the rest of the guys." You can imagine what my less inspired efforts were like. Anyway, it recently occurred to me that there are two sayings we're all familiar with that seem to contradict each other. On the one hand we say that "seeing is believing"--meaning that we can trust the evidence of our senses. Yet we also like to say that "the hand is quicker than the eye," meaning that we can't trust the evidence of our senses. One asserts that if we observe something directly we can be sure it's true. The other asserts just the opposite: that our powers of observation can easily be fooled and are therefore not trustworthy. Which one shall we believe? If we see something with our own eyes, can we believe that it's real, that it's true? Well, there are a lot of con artists out there who would certainly love to have you think so. They'll be glad to show you things you'd like to believe are real, but turn out to be smoke and mirrors. That brings to mind another popular saying that it's always good to remember: "If it sounds too good to be true—it probably is."

Today's Gospel lesson, which is John's account of his and Peter's discovery of the empty tomb, is all about seeing and believing. In it we read the following (*John 20:3-8*). "He saw and believed." But what did he see? What did he believe? What he saw was Jesus' clothing, folded up and lying where

his body had been placed. But Jesus' body was gone; it had vanished without a trace from the tomb where it had been laid. Now this tomb had been sealed and guarded by a squad of Roman soldiers. You see, both the Jews and the Romans understood what was at stake here: the *Gospel of Matthew* tells us that the chief priests and the Pharisees had gone to Pontius Pilate and asked that "the tomb be made secure"—that is, sealed and placed under a heavy guard—precisely so that Jesus' disciples would **not** be able to "...come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead." So based on what he saw—and what he DIDN'T see—John was forced to believe that something extraordinary had happened, that Jesus' body had somehow vanished miraculously from the tomb where it had been laid. *But what John and Peter didn't understand is as important as what they did:* in the very next verse, we are told that they "...still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead." In other words, they saw and believed that his body had disappeared, but they didn't understand yet that he had risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene had exactly the same reaction: she thought someone must have carried Jesus' body away and placed it somewhere else. It didn't even occur to her that he might have risen from the dead.

Many Easter sermons will be preached today on the empty tomb and other evidence that exists for Jesus' resurrection. Since the Christian faith is based upon belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, preachers will cite historical, legal, medical and testimonial evidence which proves beyond any reasonable doubt—to an objective mind—that Jesus actually rose from the dead. They will argue that there is more evidentiary proof of Jesus' resurrection than there is for any other single event in history—and they will be right. I know this is true, because I have preached those sermons myself.

The problem is, none of us have objective minds. What we **do** have is opinions—and Oh! How we love our opinions! That's why our opinions are remarkably immune to evidence that weighs against them. Outside of science (which is not exempt from this problem, by the way) probably the best run we have at basing decisions on evidence is our jury system of administering justice. Yet almost any trial lawyer will tell you that juries are swayed as much by emotion as they are by evidence. A woman who sat on the jury that awarded half a million dollars to a woman who had spilled hot coffee in her lap was asked in an interview how she felt about the fact that their verdict had become the butt of a lot of jokes. She defended herself by saying that she just didn't like the attorneys who represented McDonald's because they seemed cold and uncaring. Besides, she said, the woman had

experienced a lot of pain and McDonald's could certainly afford it. What that had to do with the facts of the case is anybody's guess, but she was quite content with her opinion and the verdict that the jury reached. As President John Adams famously said, facts are stubborn things, but when facts don't jibe with what we happen to believe, we're pretty good at finding ways to dispense with them. The committed atheist will not be convinced by any amount of evidence that there is a God in heaven because he doesn't want to believe that there is a God in heaven. And we're not all that different. Giving up a belief that we have held for a long time is almost like giving up part of ourselves.

If you doubt that we are this invested in our opinions, just consider the current political climate in our country. As we become more and more passionate about our politics, the country becomes more and more divided and angry. One commentator described the current political climate as "tribalistic": each side thinks they wear the white hats and the other side wears the black hats. Everyone gets madder and madder and becomes more and more convinced that they're on the side of the angels and the other side is just plain evil. There are probably rational discussions that could be held about political issues but we don't want to have them. We prefer to gobble up the facts that support our opinions and discount those that don't because we love our opinions! "Mess with my opinion, and you're messing with me!" So we see what we want to see and turn a blind eye to what we don't want to see and yet somehow manage to continue thinking of ourselves as objective.

The problem with "seeing is believing" is that as fallen creatures in a fallen world, we don't see as clearly as we think we do. On the contrary, as Paul wrote, "*Now we see as in a clouded mirror*" We see what we want to see so that we can believe what we want to believe. And that means that we can't really trust either one.

But if seeing is not believing, *believing does make it possible for us to see*. Once faith is planted in our heart, our eyes and ears are opened and we can begin to see clearly. Faith opens our minds to the words and wisdom of God and enables us to understand Who Jesus was, what he did—and what that means for us. It is faith and not evidence that enables us to see.

In military science there is a concept called the "fog of war" which descends on battles. Battle plans may be drawn up—and they are important to be sure—but once the battle begins, the individual soldier sees very little of the overall picture. Even generals, who are supposed to know what is going on, have only partial knowledge based on the reports and information they're

able to obtain. Once the battle is engaged, the fog of war descends and men have to take action based upon the commands they receive rather than knowledge of the overall picture.

There is a fog of war that descends on the Christian's life as well. Our human eyes and our human reason want to see and understand everything, but we can't see or understand the ways of God, because his ways are as far above our ways as the heavens are above the earth. Even faith cannot see the whole picture. God has only given us enough faith to follow him like a frightened child is led through the dangerous traffic by clinging to the hand of his father. Human eyes and human reason—accompanied by human pride—fight against faith all the days of our lives. *“Faith—pish! Get real! Open your eyes and face reality!”*

Don't trust that voice, my friends. It comes from only one source, and that source is the ULTIMATE confidence man whose hand is **far** quicker than your eye. This “source” has flooded the world with lies ever since the Garden of Eden and he still prowls around like a hungry lion, seeking to devour the souls of those who have no faith. He wants only one thing, and that is for you to abandon your faith in Jesus Christ and rest your hopes for happiness and safety on what he has to offer. That you leave God's word behind and believe what he has to say. And what he has to say is always the same: *“Did God really say that?” “Everyone knows that nobody rises from the dead! Face up to it: life stinks and then you die.”* Such are the words of our enemy. **But he is a liar!** God's word is truth and Christ HAS risen from the dead to give you and me eternal life! As Paul wrote, *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us!” (Romans 8:18)* For, *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Cor. 2:9)*

When we walk by faith, the Lord guides our steps and keeps our feet from stumbling. Of course the battle that goes on between our human conviction that “seeing is believing” and our Spirit-given faith that Jesus rose to give us eternal life—that battle will continue until we draw our last breath. But don't despair! In the midst of battle the fog of war is quite normal. We have something better than seeing: we have faith in the Word of God. Listen to that Word, and you will learn something far better than to believe based on what you see. You will learn to see because of what you believe!

HE has risen! HE has risen, indeed!

Amen.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 The Resurrection of Christ

15 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

John 20:1-9 The Empty Tomb

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)