

## Seeing is Believing...or Is It?

John 20:19-31

Seeing is believing. Or is it really? Can you be sure of what you're seeing at any given time? Or what you have missed that was right in front of your eyes?

Ever spend all morning looking for your glasses only to find them in the most visible place in the room practically right in front of you?

Were you certain you saw something flicker beyond your line of vision, only to turn and see nothing there?

Have you ever focused on a picture in which you see something completely different than the person next to you?

Why?

Because though our eyes provide information to our brains, our minds "decide" what we see.

In her book, *Slant*, Lori Wagner describes the human phenomenon of "confirmation bias," in which we see what our mind expects to see, even if it's not there. We can select or ignore words or visuals in our line of vision depending on whether or not our brain believes they are important to our frame of understanding. That puts an interesting spin on our ability to discern knowledge, let alone truth.

Why is it so hard for us to change old habits, old belief systems, to emerge from trauma, to change our inner stories about ourselves or others? Because our brains operate something like an organic architecture. Our sensory organs and our brains interact. While our eyes provide information, our brain stores that information according to our growing knowledge. Each of us has a different looking "architectural design" in our heads. So, when I see, I may not exactly see what you see. Or even if we see the "same" thing, we may interpret it differently according to our inner constructs.

So, what does this say about seeing? About believing something to be so?

Perhaps, instead of saying that "seeing is believing," we need to say instead that "believing is seeing." More accurately, it's likely a combination of the two.

According to organizational theorist Karl Weick, Your beliefs are cause maps that you impose on the world after which you "see" what you have already imposed.

Now let's apply that to something bigger: you don't have faith because you see something to be true, but your faith colors the way you see the world, yourself, and others.

Those with faith in God, in Jesus, in the resurrection, in life live more content, hopeful, and assured lives than those who find nothing solid to believe in.

But now here's another surprise: Doubt is not the opposite of faith. In fact, we all doubt. That's why we need our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our fingers to touch. Our sensory faculties confirm what we believe. They assure us that what we know is "real" in the sense that it fits into our vision of what the world is like.

Ever know someone who believes he or she is a bad person? Those feelings will color the way that person sees everything in the world. On the other hand, if someone feels good about themselves, confident, and self-assured, that person will likely flourish in his or her relationships, find hope in everything, and see good in the world around him or her. That doesn't mean that this person never doubts anything. But he or she has the courage to ask questions about what he or she sees. So, in a sense, doubt is not the opposite of faith, but the confirmer of faith.

In our scripture for today, we see Jesus' first appearance to his disciples from within a locked room. Notably, Thomas is missing. We don't know why he isn't there. Did he go for food? Did he need to check on his masonry business?

Thomas was a stone mason and master builder. Did he check on his family? Was he on a secret errand? We have no idea. We only know he wasn't there during that first encounter. So, when the others told him what they had seen, his answer? "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."

Does this response mean that Thomas had no faith? No, of course not. He was one of Jesus' most ardent disciples. But he was also a builder, an architect, a realist, who wasn't afraid of asking hard questions about what he felt was right. Otherwise, he wouldn't have become a disciple in the first place. Thomas was the same one who suggested that if they go to visit Lazarus, they might "die along with him." (John 11:16) Was Lazarus killed? (We know the Pharisees had a hit on his life! We know that the disciples feared Jesus' entry into Jerusalem when the threat of death loomed over him. But only Thomas spoke up in this way.

Thomas was also the one who said to Jesus, "Lord we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" (John 14:5-6) Jesus replied: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Thomas was devoted to Jesus, protective of him even. His faith was strong, and he believed wholeheartedly in Jesus' mission. But his mind was one of practicality, strategy, analysis, reason. His role as a disciple among the twelve was to ask the hard questions. And it's because of Thomas' questions that our belief is confirmed in the witness of this scripture and that our faith is assured.

Doubt is not a lack of faith but confirmation of what the mind already longs to believe.

If Thomas had not had faith, could he even have listened that day a week later? Would he have witnessed what he did? Could he have been the apostle he later would become?

Or did his mind, even a mind that focused on the practical and empirical, do a "double take" when he felt with his own hands the nail marks and wounds of Jesus?

That was enough to not only confirm perhaps what he believed or hoped, but to change his inner vision to one accepting of supernatural truth.

You see, here is the one "paradox" about believing and seeing. Once in a while, we can encounter a "glitch," something so out of our realm of understanding, something so clarifying that it "shifts" our entire architecture –adds something new to our inner vision.

This was in fact Jesus' gift in his telling of parables. It's what happens when someone suddenly sees something in their lives that changes their view of themselves and others. We call it healing. Jesus calls it seeing.

Thomas' experienced a "paradox" that day –and it would change his life and our witness of the resurrection for all time to come.

The gospel writer John tells us in this scripture today that these signs were written so that we might come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing we may have life in his name.

Without Thomas' questions, his doubts, his inquiry, we may pass off this scripture as just a collective wishful experience of Jesus' inner posse. But with Thomas's doubt, and his subsequent confirmation, his paradox shock and his complete change of spirit, our own belief becomes assured, and we too can become open to experiencing Jesus' resurrection in our own lines of vision.

This season of Easter is a time of change, of becoming, of believing, and of seeing things new. I encourage all of you to challenge your expectations, to challenge what you know, and think is true, and instead to read the scriptures with new eyes, to see Jesus in your life with less expectation and more fascination. And in doing so, may you too experience new paradoxes of knowing and growing that will change your beliefs, your views, your faith, and you.