



Year B Easter

John 20.1-18

## Believing - Seeing - Believing

### Seeing

*Believing is seeing and seeing is believing*

We can never understand the truth of God unless we first take the risk of believing without seeing.

### **John's Easter story is about seeing and believing**

The resurrection story as John recounted it is all about **seeing**

And seeing which leads to believing

And believing which leads to seeing more clearly the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord

*Mary SAW the stone had been taken away from the entrance to the tomb*

*John looked into the tomb and SAW the linen wrappings*

*Simon Peter arrived - went in and SAW the wrappings in more detail*

*Then John went in SAW and believed*

*- Jesus had really meant it when he told them he would rise again after his death!*

the seeing went on

*Mary LOOKED into the tomb and SAW two men in white*

*She turned round and SAW Jesus - not knowing it was him*

Finally, bursting with the excitement of faith confirmed by sight

*Mary went and told the disciples, I have SEEN the Lord*

### **Dawn to Sunrise**

John gives us another aspect of the SEEING when he relates that Mary went to the tomb early on the Sunday morning **while it was still dark**

-the whole episode had taken place between dawn and sunrise!

*[which, of course happens quicker in Palestine than it does for us here]*

So each 'SEEING' John describes was probably accompanied by an increase in physical light.

John loved the light. His *Gospel* and his *Letters* are full of teaching about the light of God's truth shining into the world through Jesus who calls himself *The Light of the World*. The magical light of the Greek Islands, where he was exiled, greatly influences John's words in *The Revelation*

And whether or not John intended it, this story has a background of *Light and SEEING*

### **From first light**

I imagine Mary, at first light making her way cautiously along the well worn track to the garden tomb, - it's too early to start the embalming, but not too early to just be there. She is surrounded by fearsome shadows.

She can just make out the tomb and see that the stone is out of place.

It is a heart-stopping moment - the chill in the air creeps into her deepest being

She cries for help and runs back into the city to alert the disciples

In response John and Peter set out for the tombs. Although day has broken it is still too shadowy to make out what is inside. But it is empty!

In the short while it takes Peter to catch up light increases rapidly. The first misty-grey sky in the east now has a touch of blue. He and John are able to make out more detail - the white shroud stands out, close to the separate head wrapping, hurriedly wound the previous day. It was enough to remind and convince John of Jesus' words - *On the third day I will rise again.*

The men returned to the city, leaving Mary in the garden. The sky whitened into a pre-sunrise glow, the mists lifted and in the eerie light Mary is astonished to see, through her tears, men in white - angels - inside the tomb. Sunlight touches them - they appear dazzling white against the dark background.

*Why are you crying?*

*They've taken my Lord!* she explodes .... and turns away, to discover Jesus ...!

But she cannot be sure. The sun has pushed above the horizon and facing east she is blinded by a glare of reddened gold. Then Jesus speaks her name. In the moment of recognition broad shafts of light fill the sky touching all living things with gold.

### **The Resurrection Mystery**

Resurrection is still a mystery, beyond our present experience

*It is something we have not done yet, somewhere we have not been.*

*How can we understand?*

Jesus told Thomas

*- the first followers are privileged to see in order to be sure - but ever after that, for most - believing must come before seeing - and depends on the witness of the first Christians*

For many that still presents an obstacle to a living faith and a personal relationship with God - with Jesus

### **To those who say - how can I believe?**

How can I be sure?

I would say - **go through .....**

### **The Sunrise Experience**

#### **Go looking**

- we will have uncertain hope in the darkness
- we will travel along familiar paths of life, faith, worship
- we will receive intimations of resurrection reality everywhere in the changed lives of believers, in the hopes of the Spring

***Be prepared to be disappointed***

- certainty does not come all at once - there will be the twilight time
- the doubting - peering into impenetrable mists of unproved stories
- questions without answers

But that is where we have to hang in - trusting

- the promises of God
- the testimony of others who have been there before us

***Share your feelings and questions with others***

Find the believers

Listen to their words

Watch their lives

Stay in the fellowship

See the reality of their everyday walk with Jesus

***Look inside for yourself***

Honestly and earnestly look for Jesus

Listen to his words - get to know him

- he said he is the way to the father - to faith and to life

Look for him until you see him

- he may look like the gardener, or someone else at first
- don't be surprised - but dawn will grow into daylight
- until in our hearts we say - *YES!*

Even then we will not fully understand.

That is beyond us.

God doesn't fit into human words - only into people's hearts!

***Finally, Go and tell others***

Share what you believe and in the telling

Christ Jesus becomes more real and you become more **convinced**

**Convinced** of his presence with us - always - or as often as we make the connection!

**Convinced of** his victory over life and death in the everyday struggles for a better me and a better way of life

**Convinced of** his peace

in life's most challenging and stressful experiences

**Convinced** of his justice - of his kingdom rolling back the injustices of war and poverty, of pain and powerlessness

**Convinced of** his gift of eternal life

The joy of being really ALIVE

And knowing that life is for ever with him.

Missing !

John 20.24 Thomas was not with them

**The Real Problem**

Doubting Thomas ! But was that his real problem ?  
*Unless I see the scars of the nails in his hands, and touch his scars, I WILL not believe !*

Thomas is reputed to have been a thinking man who would deliberate carefully before he accepted a situation or fact

Maybe he DID ask questions without answers

- *how can Jesus come back to life*

- *and with a 'body' - speaking - eating - how can he walk out of the tomb?*

questions which still do not have wait explanation

but maybe there was more to it than just the doubts

- maybe a certain pique about what he had missed

hence - not *'I can't believe it, but I WON'T believe it!'*

The sort of situation which has crippled the church many times since - not a disagreement about doctrine so much as hurt feelings about other people having religious experiences that we may not have had !

*or new thinking which challenges the stability of my faith and life - and leave me out*

**What Thomas missed**

Thomas had missed a lot !

He had missed being among the first to witness the risen Christ

But so much more !

He had missed Jesus *peace* blessing

he had missed the joy which replaced the disciples' fear

He had missed the commission of Jesus - *as the Father sent me, so I send you*

He had missed the anointing of the Holy Spirit (the breath of Jesus)

and the knowledge of Christ's authority over sin and evil in the world of human life!

Imagine the talk in the upper room

- going over and over the events

- thrilling to the experiences

- and Thomas listened as the one who had missed out

**Where was Thomas ?**

I wonder why Thomas was not with them?

Personal reasons?

staying elsewhere and afraid to move about in the city ?

so devastated by the events of the Cross that he could not bring himself to talk about it with the others

perhaps some discord between them - after all they were all distraught and on edge ?

We have no way of knowing the details about Thomas  
BUT we do know that the root of his problem - whether doubt or not - was that he 'was not with the other disciples when Jesus came`  
He missed Jesus - peace - joy - the gift of the Holy Spirit - power for service  
*because he was not in the fellowship*  
He was missing when the people of Jesus met together

### **In the fellowship**

Jesus is met in many different ways and places  
- in the quiet of personal prayer and reading  
- through an experience, maybe of sorrow or pain when his presence is real

But more often it is in the fellowship of Christians together

- together in worship, study, prayer,  
that Jesus becomes real - with peace - joy - the breath of his Spirit ...

### **True Fellowship**

Fifty years ago, Florence Allshorn bemoaned the state of Christian fellowship  
She was renowned in missionary circles - a deep spiritual life - a love-filled personality - not always conventional ! - trained countless women as Christian workers all over the world

*Christian people have thought of fellowship as a delightful consequence of Christian life instead of being a vital part of it. The place where the action is. Too often the fellowship has ceased to be either Christian or delightful - and not rooted in the commandment of Jesus to love one another. (Florence Allshorn)*

and because we often fail to *realise* the promise of Jesus  
- where two or three are **gathered in my name** I am there among them.  
The key being 'in my name' and 'I am there' God is there !

So what makes the true fellowship ?

Those two things

Gathered In My Name

### **In My Name**

In the presence - for the purposes - after the likeness OF JESUS  
Christ-centred life together

That was the upper room experience  
That was what Thomas had missed  
- not the scars and the answers to questions - but Jesus  
When they met the other questions ceased to matter  
AND **began** to suggest answers ...

It is still the same when Christ is at the centre of real fellowship  
which is the resurrection/ upper room experience

### **Gathered**

Together - sharing the Spirit of Jesus

The followers of Jesus came together in the upper room - sharing  
sharing their fears - their concerns - their doubts and questions  
brought together by a common crisis and a common need  
- the saving of the world - the establishing of the kingdom  
asking questions

what do we do ?

where do we go from here?

What does the Lord want of us?

true fellowship is the gathering of committed Christian people who are desperate  
for the souls of others  
for the salvation and healing of the world

It is when we find such loving - heart-aching longing for others,  
that together IN LOVE we seek and find the presence and power of Jesus

### **Nearly Missed !**

Thomas nearly missed it

Let the doubts, questions, anxieties them us together

If we have to worry - worry about missing the real fellowship  
- missing Jesus and all the blessings he waits to give

Thomas missed it - for a week

But he caught up !

And Jesus, as always, was gracious enough to give him what he asked.

He still is for those of us who cannot see what Thomas saw.

Don't be missing. There is so much to be missed!



**Climb this Mountain!**

*Luke 24: 50 He led them out ....*

**Mountain Top View**

The views from the top of the Malvern hills are spectacular  
They are hardly worthy of the title *mountain* but they contain old earthworks of an ancient fortress guarding the surrounding countryside. On a clear day - looking all around it is possible to view the Wye and Severn valleys, the Vale of Evesham  
- and see into seven counties.

The Ascension of Jesus was a hill-top experience like that  
- with a view of the whole world in the embrace of heaven

The apostles meeting with Jesus  
at the moment of his return to the Father  
- to his glory at God's right hand  
- was an experience in which Jesus showed them the whole panoramic view of God's great plans for his world and its history

Luke records how Jesus talked with them  
He led them through the scriptures

First he reminded them of the things he had taught them while he was with them  
Truth about himself which they had previously found so hard to understand  
- words about what God's requires in terms of holiness  
in people  
in his world and its societies

Then he gave them an over-view of the history of God's people  
the people he had chosen for his purposes  
- through their history the world would know him  
- receive his salvation and perfection  
- experience the Kingdom of God - of heaven in personal life and in the life of the world

He showed them his place in all that  
everything pointed to him  
the books of Moses  
- the beginnings of the nation with Abraham  
- the exodus  
- the building of a special people in their own land  
- the words of the prophets  
- the coming King - and his Kingdom -

It's all there, he told them  
- all my suffering  
- my resurrection  
- my Kingdom  
- all our history was preparing for this

**Then** he turned them round to another view

- the future

Now , he said, the message will go out

- like the ripples on a pool - from Jerusalem to Judaea to Samaria - to Asia – to Africa –  
to circle the whole world

### **Climb this mountain**

The celebration of Jesus' Ascension  
is crucial to Christian vision, mission and expansion

All our hope is inspired by the glory of Christ  
living, crucified, risen, ascended at the Father's side

It is vital for us to **climb this mountain**  
To live with the vision of the glory of Christ

We are part of all that  
- the purposes of God from the creation of the world  
- all creation and history finding their fulfillment **In Jesus Christ**

As the Church we are all part of that!  
Involved in God's great salvation process  
- in the universal kingdom drama

### **Witnesses**

But how?

If we rely only on the media  
the world view seems somewhat bleak for the Kingdom  
But, of course! Jesus said it would be like that  
- grim news doesn't mean the Kingdom of God is not coming

It is being worked out against a background of good and evil  
*All around us – as Paul says – we can see the labour pains of God's kingdom being born  
anew in every generation*

And the way the Kingdom comes is by the WITNESS  
**You are my witnesses** Jesus told his followers

You - disciples, apostles, friends  
- have to go out and tell by your words and by your changed lives what God has done  
How the Kingdom of love is coming  
- and after you, others will take the message on in the same way

### **Climb this mountain**

We are one more ripple on that expanding work of the kingdom  
- called to make our witness  
But it has to be first hand

It has to be OUR own experience of Jesus  
And for that -  
We have to climb this mountain  
- to see him and his Kingdom in all his glory

### **The Witness**

Our witness is first – to Jesus

To the new life of love which Jesus brings  
as we turn to God as the centre of our living – shifting ourselves from the centre of the picture and giving him his rightful place there

It is our witness to the life-changing of Jesus  
and to the enabling power of his Holy Spirit  
that enables the Kingdom to grow

*As Jesus taught in parables of leaven in the bread dough and seed growing secretly*

### **Climb this mountain**

The world is still waiting for the fulfillment of the Kingdom  
And Jesus is still calling his people to be his witnesses

But it all begins with a vision of his glory  
- the wonder of who he is, what he done, and what he has promised

*Jesus who was at the beginning in the creation of all things  
Jesus who is the Saviour of the whole world  
- bringing peace and love and hope into all life  
- Jesus who is resurrection and eternal life  
- Jesus is Lord of the true church  
- and who is proved to be God and friend [Colossians 1]*

There is no greater challenge to the Church today than  
Climb this mountain  
Where the vision of Christ's glory  
can change us  
and save our world.



**A favourite psalm**

Among the most well known of scriptures

Here are words of comfort, strength and hope which say something to almost every experience of life

Doubtless the most well used song in Christian worship through the years

It enters into almost every phase of the Christian's life

Birth Confirmation Marriage Death

**Amazing promises**

The psalm of just six verses

Contains the most amazing promise which many of us will have proved

***Of provision***

Often when wondering where the next meal comes from, or how we clothe the children, or pay the fuel bill - not least how to fund that special event - we have found that promise true *I shall not want*

***Of renewal and rest - beside still waters***

Again and again in times of weariness - physical tiredness - or when life itself becomes a burden, we have proved - in God there is a place of refreshing and renewal

- like taking time off to relax and sort ourselves out

***Of conquest of fear - even fear of death***

When we dread the future like a dark night closing around us - and discover the strength of *'I am with you'*

- *'you are not alone'*

***Of comfort - through love and discipline - the rod and staff***

*Even when we have had to turn to God out of a deep sense of guilt - to beg forgiveness - and accept the discipline of putting things right with him and others we have wronged or offended - there has been the comfort of knowing his judgement is all bound up with his love*

***Of spiritual blessing - anointing - the Holy Spirit***

*Moments of spiritual awareness when we have felt the power of God at work in our lives - and know that his Spirit lives in us and will use us for his purposes*

***Of heaven and eternal life - in the house of the Lord for ever***

The great hope of the Christian

- eternity would not be long enough to recount all this life's blessings and fulfilled promises

## **Promises for the Church**

Wonderful as those promises are

- embracing all our life
- they are not just for us personally - but for us 'together' as Christ's people

They are also promises for the Church

***Not just for the sheep - but for the whole flock***

Look at the psalm of promises again in relation to the Church

## **God provides**

*Living by faith may be a bit of a hand to mouth existence - but it's God's hand to my mouth!*

It seems a mystery to me that the church is often seen as a poor charity when God our Father owns the universe!  
Surely his church must be something of an embarrassment to him!

## **God revives and renews**

We are reminded of how in various parts of the world at times the church falls on hard times - ***and revival follows!***

*Evidenced in amazing experiences of church growth in Africa - in Korea*

*As with the origins of our own church  
England experienced some of its most un-religious moments before the eighteenth century renewal movements*

The stories are endless of how faithful and prayerful Christians have seen the renewal of the church in their time - in God's 'right time'

## **God loves and disciplines in his way**

When we ask - sometimes despairingly - *what is God doing with his church?*

It is likely He is re-shaping it!

When it does not honour him - because its practices and divisions are a denial of his nature and of the gospel - parts have to be under the rod

When it no longer serves its age or speaks to the people - it has to change

*The church of God cannot fail - he won't let it  
- he has a purpose even in the dark days  
All he asks is that his people remain faithful*

***And he is still with us, giving his comfort in hard times - and fears***

*The cry of faith - God is with us - is the assurance of Christ's resurrection victory*

***And greater promises***

***God gives the anointing of his Spirit***

*To Mary's 'How can this be?' heaven's answer is - 'The Holy Spirit'*

*God is still pouring out his spirit for his people*

*The answer to every question - every difficulty - the Holy Spirit*

*The power of God in Jesus - in us and with us*

***And not least***

***God makes us the people of eternity***

*We shall dwell in the house of the Lord, always*

*We are the citizens of heaven - as Paul describes the church*

*People who live in daily life - and live by heaven's standards*

*Who live with heaven's assurance*

*Who have the courage to be different - to be God's people*

**All these promises are for the encouragement of the whole flock - together**

**BUT if we are claim and prove these promises**

**THERE IS A CONDITION**

*We have to really mean it when we say 'The Lord is MY shepherd' - OUR Shepherd!*

***Our part as the church today is as it has always been***

***is that we follow***

*Having what Evelyn Underhill called the 'doggy' qualities of faithfulness and goodness*

*Which Jesus understood as 'sheep qualities'*

**'Following'**

*The picture is of Jesus - the good shepherd with his sheep following him*

*- as was usual for eastern herding*

*After Jesus' resurrection*

*fabulous story of meeting Peter with other disciples on the shore of Galilee*

*For Peter there was forgiveness - challenge - a new commission*

*The only thing Jesus asks of the renewed disciple*

*IS - follow me*

***And to us ...***

- if you want to be in the place of blessing and spiritual life and power  
Get back in the flock  
Obey my voice - keep close - keep following

**Live in his presence**

living in the promises is living in Christ's presence  
For ourselves  
And for the Church

Be in his presence -  
*In the house of the Lord all the days of my life*

The great promise of Easter - I am with you, always...  
And the Christian's response '*and me with you, Lord*'  
*I want to* be in the place where the 'God things' are happening  
In worship, prayer, service  
Spreading out into the wider community like a tide of love