

“Something God Alone Can See...Right Now”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

April 16, 2023 - Second Sunday of Easter

[Acts 2:1-14a, 22-32; John 20:19-31](#)

As I mentioned to our youngsters during the children’s message, there are some reports of people seeing things that are pretty hard to find believable. It can be hard to believe reports about things that differ from our own lived experience, or that are not in alignment with what we know to be true about the ways the universe works. And so we can hardly fault Thomas for not jumping to belief upon hearing the reports that Jesus had risen and appeared to the other disciples. Too often, though, poor Thomas has been faulted for this very normal behavior and had been labeled Doubting Thomas. Perhaps better would be for us to remember him as Trusting Thomas, as upon experiencing for himself the risen Christ, he did not have doubts or question what his own eyes saw or what his own hands felt, but he proclaimed this very brief but meaningful statement of faith: “My Lord and my God!”

The gospel notes that it may be hard for those who are not witnesses to the resurrected Christ, as Thomas and the first disciples were, to offer a similar statement, but if we could trust somehow in these statements of others as they have been passed down to us in written form, based on stories that the earliest witnesses shared with one another and the world, as we heard Preaching Peter do in our first lesson from Acts, we will find ourselves to be blessed as believing leads to life.

But can we trust these reports of others? Can we follow Thomas in believing or Peter in proclaiming with conviction the good news that Christ has risen? Can we accept with belief the words of the four books of the Christian New Testament that we call our gospels, books telling the resurrection story (and other stories from the life of Jesus) in very different ways from one another, but that were all accepted into our canon of sacred text because they were considered trustworthy and true by the first Christian communities to receive them as well as by the other communities with whom they were shared?

We can, but believing these reports, which was hard for Thomas upon first hearing them, and was likely hard for those who heard the reports of Thomas and Peter and others after them, is probably harder now than ever. We live in a modern time in which we seek to examine everything critically, that is to look closely and carefully, without predetermining the results of our scrutiny. Many of us who are Christians, especially mainline Protestants and many in the Catholic tradition, now examine our own sacred texts with such a critical eye, not just mindlessly trusting these words because we've been told they are true. And so we tend not to jump to belief immediately upon hearing the message of the gospels.

I believe that it can be even harder today than ever to believe in the reports of others, even other eyewitnesses, because there is so much that our own eyes see or our ears hear that just isn't real. Consider for a moment the awesome power of banks of super-computers working in concert to generate things that appear real but just aren't, such as the many Artificial Intelligence- or AI-generated images of Pope Francis that have been circulating around on the internet this week that show the pontiff strutting around wearing a stylish puffy white coat, or cruising around on a Harley Davidson motorcycle, or strapping into the seat of a military jet, or cavorting with crowds in the desert at the Burning Man event. And how many people have carefully created and curated online personas that are actually not at all like their real lives? Not just influencers but many of the rest of us post images, videos, or stories of ourselves looking our best or happiest or richest for the rest of our online "friends" or others to admire. And if we don't look good enough, there are plenty of filters and other tools to digitally enhance ourselves so that we can look flawless, glamorous, or otherwise "Like"-worthy. Too many of us, especially our youngsters, see perfected people in their posts; compare our own dull, shabby, common, less talented, less glamorous, more sedentary lives to theirs; and then consider ourselves to be deficient, worth less, or worthless. Those of us who are addicted to the bright, beautiful colors of our screens and who are driven to never miss the social media musings of our friends or celebrities or others we follow are especially prone to feelings of depression and anxiety. All because we believe what we see, even though it is not real.

Perhaps in this Easter season, we can work, instead, on believing things that are real, even though we can't see or otherwise bodily sense them. There are plenty

of such things beyond our senses that we can believe in, such as the truth that the universe is full of billions upon billions of swirling galaxies, now revealed to us through the powerful James Webb telescope in space that senses infrared light, outside of our human range of vision, and then translates what it sees into images we can see -- brilliantly colorful and incredibly detailed images that truly inspire awe. Or consider the daffodils and other flowers now beginning to bloom, flowers that come from bulbs that seemed lifeless as they rested invisibly in the ground over the winter, but that were actually just getting ready for their springtime work of making the world more beautiful and colorful. Just because we can't see the bulb in the ground, doesn't mean that it's not there, doing its work. And just because we can't see distant galaxies does not mean they do not exist.

And in the same way, just because we ourselves can't go back in time and witness Thomas touching wounds of the resurrected Christ or touch them ourselves, and we can't go back and witness how the stories of Christ's resurrection were shared from one believer to another and one community to another until they were preserved by being retold in the literary forms we have today, we can believe in this miracle.

Just as the flowers prove that the bulb is alive, there are believable signs of Christ's miraculous resurrection life all around us. It was with joy that many of us gathered here in this room yesterday to witness the marriage of Sarah and Cory; many more gathered here on Thursday and Friday as our Purpose School preschoolers dazzled their families and friends with their amazing singing and wiggling talents during the annual Spring Show; still more were here for activities of our girl scouts, boy scouts, and cub scouts; and we had a full(ish) house last week for our Easter Sunday worship service and egg hunt. We couldn't envision any of this happening when we were in a pandemic fog just three years ago. But God is always work, preparing resurrection miracles in spaces beyond our ability to sense, only to reveal new life in some right season.

I pray that you would sense God at work in your life now, preparing and creating miracles of new life that you can experience in this season. May you experience newness that can lead you to hope in the yet-to-be-revealed new things that God will do. And may what you experience lead you to trust in the miracles that God

has worked in the past, of which we not only have received reports but can witness now with our own senses their very real fruits. May you believe...and be alive! Amen.