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 A Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year B
 St. Alban's Church, Sinking Spring, PA
 April 8 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is no doubt that we live in a society that values the notion that "seeing is believing."

These days, if we don't witness something with our own eyes, it's almost as if it didn't even happen at all. This is a perpetual victory in marketing, because whoever is trying to sell us something wants to prey on our natural curiosity to see things first-hand. ESPN, the 24-hour-a-day sports channel, often advertises its upcoming games not by the nature of the sport itself but by enticing the viewer to tune in with the tagline "you never know what's going to happen next." It's like the group of friends who, after having a legendary night out own the town, recap the entire evening story after story to the one unlucky guy who missed it with the melancholy phrase "you had to be there." Even Jesus himself told his first disciples to "come and see" what all the fuss was about.

Perhaps we are simply and naturally skeptical of those things we haven't seen for ourselves.

Perhaps we, too, are no strangers to this notion in the Christian faith. For though we are probably familiar with Jesus' words to Thomas that we've just heard -- "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" -- we must consider these words in the larger context of the Christian faith. For there are also numerous examples from the Christian faith that affirm the importance of "seeing" as part of our faithful witness to God:

- As in the prologue of John's First Letter that we've just heard: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, **what we have seen** with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life"
- Or with Simeon, who, upon seeing the baby Jesus in the temple, proclaimed: "For **these eyes of mine have seen the Savior**, whom you have prepared for all the world to see"
- From the Sermon on the Mount: "let your light shine before others, so that they may **see your good works** and give glory to your Father in heaven."
- From John's account of Palm Sunday, when the Greeks approach Philip and say: "**Sir, we wish to see Jesus.**"
- From the book of Job, as read in our burial office: "After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body **I shall see God.**"
- Or in the Letter to the Hebrews: "As it is, we do not yet see everything...**but we do see Jesus.**"

It is not just the nature of our faith to look for God but also the nature of God to be seen. For we do not believe in a god who is removed, who is far from us, who is detached and at a distance from the cares and concerns of our lives. Instead, we believe in God who was made incarnate fully in Christ Jesus and who is continuing to be revealed through scripture, sacrament, and Spirit. To seek after God and to look for Jesus is not a sign of skepticism, but faith; and for God to be seen is not a mistake, but a part of God's plan for the salvation of the world.

A large part of God's plan for the world was the resurrection of Jesus, which, perhaps *is* one of those examples of "you had to be there." I say this because, as it happened, not many *were* there to witness to the empty tomb. We must remember that in the midst of Christ's Passion, not only does Peter deny Jesus but almost all of those who followed Jesus flee in their fear. It is only a faithful few -- Mary, the mother of our Lord, Mary Magdalene, and in John's Gospel, the beloved disciple -- who remain at the cross. The women then return to the tomb on the first Easter Day only to see it empty. When Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, she presumes him to be the gardener. But then, after he calls her by name, she immediately recognizes him and sees him to be Jesus. The first ultimate proof of the resurrection was Jesus allowing himself to be seen in his new body. And then, when running on to tell the disciples, she exclaims to them "I have seen the Lord," but they do not believe her.

All of which brings us to Thomas in today's Gospel from John. I'm afraid he's earned a rather dubious nickname given his insistence on wanting to see and touch the wounds of Christ. "Doubting Thomas" seems an ill-fitting choice, though, for this is the same man who, when Jesus told the disciples he would continue on to Judea despite the danger, said "Let us also go, that we may die with him." If anything, Thomas' faith in Jesus is of little dispute. He simply had the same reaction as the rest of the disciples -- they doubted the word of Mary but believed when they saw the body and wounds of Jesus.

So when Thomas is back with the group and Jesus returns to them, did he believe because he saw Jesus? Maybe. But I think more accurate for Thomas' situation is that his belief in Christ hadn't changed. He, unlike the rest of the fearful disciples, was not locked up in a room the first time Jesus appeared to them -- instead he was out in the world and not afraid. For all we know, he was already out looking for the Risen Lord. But I might ask the question a different way -- did he see and recognize something (or someone) in whom he already believed? Thomas indeed doubted, but like the rest of the disciples earlier who didn't believe the faithful women, Thomas doubted the testimony of others, not the identity of Jesus. After all, once he sees the exact marks that he knows Jesus to have, Thomas then gives what might be the greatest confession of faith we have in scripture: "My Lord and my God!"

Where we might be able to connect to Thomas isn't just in his skepticism or even his doubt, which I imagine we all may have from time to time. However, like Thomas, our doubts don't necessarily take us further from our faith, they can make our faith stronger. Thomas knew what the crucified Jesus would have looked like, and considering no one prior to or since Jesus has been raised to new life on this earth, a little skepticism and doubt might have been prudent at the time. Instead, as he did for Mary and the rest of the disciples, Jesus gave to Thomas the one thing he needed to believe: his body. We might even be able to say that Thomas was the first to truly understand the significance of Jesus' body, the same body that was broken for our iniquities, by whose wounds we have been healed, the same body we have seen, come to know, and soon will receive in the bread and wine of Holy Eucharist, broken for us.

I encourage you in this Eastertide to remember that faith in Christ which you, too, have received from the beginning, what you have heard, what you have seen with your eyes, what you have looked at and touched with your hands, for we too have come to see and celebrate the truth of this season as we bear witness to the Risen Christ in this place. Remember that our life in God does not simply rely on intangible things or blind faith but instead prospers and is strengthened by all of those moments when we have seen Jesus revealed in our lives, when we have witnessed to his presence in our brothers and sisters, and when we have come to know him in the breaking of the bread. May we, like faithful Thomas, be courageous enough to seek out Jesus in his risen life, that we, too, may know him and love him as our Lord and our God.

Amen.