

Seeing Is Believing
[based on John 20:19-31]

A pastor tells the following in the Abingdon Preaching Annual. "I've never seen such a crowd in church", the woman exclaimed. I didn't know her, but apparently, she was impressed by the number of people here for Easter worship. Then, as she was shaking my hand and moving toward the front door, she added, "Do you suppose it will make any difference?"

I held on to her hand so she couldn't get away, "What do you mean?" I said, "Will what make a difference?" "Easter," she shot back. "Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday?"

That lady's question is truly a profound one. Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday? Will Easter make any difference in your life? Has this week been any different for you because of the Easter event last Sunday?

Easter is a truly religious holiday. Oh, sure, we have the Easter bunny and the old tradition of buying new clothes, but in the final analysis, Easter has not been commercialized - it is accepted as a religious event, so I ask again, has Easter made any difference in your life?

One person who found that Easter does make a difference is James, the brother of Jesus, and of Thomas, whom genealogy charts claim was a half-brother to Jesus. Listen to this letter which he *supposedly* penned...

Dear Thomas,

After so many years, I am glad that I can finally write this letter to you. I was not sure that it would be possible. I am more skeptical than even you, and I was not sure how I would ever be able to believe in this Jesus of Nazareth you followed. He was crucified and that was the end of it as far as I was concerned.

Yes, you had some hallucination, I thought. Hanging around with those twelve, it was no wonder you'd begun to lose your mind. But it was clear that you at least were serious about it when you left for India.

I pray that this letter will reach you so that you can share my joy. Your dedication to proclaiming Jesus was always inspiring to me, even if I thought it was wrong-headed and unbelievable.

But let me tell you what happened to me.

We left Galilee to live in Jerusalem, hoping to find better circumstances in that city. Here in Jerusalem, a tailor can make more money, but expenses are greater. Whether we will come out ahead, I am not yet sure.

We found some rooms to rent, Naomi and me and the children. Of course, we were very nervous, even frightened, about leaving our homes and families, to live in this crowded, busy place. We did have contact with cousin Micah, but he lived some distance away from our new home in the city.

As it turns out, our neighbors are wonderful people. Stephanus and Miriam welcomed us warmly when we arrived, and made sure that we were provided for, from the very first day we moved in.

Naomi was sick within the week of our arrival and Miriam made extra trips to the well for our water. I could certainly expect our friends to treat us so, but we were strangers to these people. We were afraid that we'd left this neighbourliness behind in Galilee.

Not long after this, we received word that Naomi's mother died, and so we had to go back to Galilee to take care of some business, and to visit and mourn with her family. We did not look forward to the long trip, and our donkey had a sore hoof and was unable to make the journey.

When Stephanus learned of our situation, he immediately offered us the use of his donkey *and* cart, so that the children could ride, and we could make better time. This generosity was difficult to accept, but I could tell he was sincere by the peaceful look in his eyes, as he encouraged me to make use of his transport.

Although Miriam and Stephanus are always busy, they never seem hurried. They always have time to listen and to talk, or to lend a hand. So, over the course of a month or so, we became quite friendly.

I finally had to ask Stephanus how it was that he is so peaceful and joyful all the time. I don't mean that he's a joker or unfeeling. I was touched by the way he carried himself, the way he responded to situations with a clear sense of fairness and confidence. He was sober, but not boring. He had a genuine interest in me. At first, of course, that was simply flattering, but then I began to appreciate that he cared for me simply for who I am, not who I might become, or what I might do for him. As you know, Thomas, that is rare.

So, I asked him how he could remain so positive, regardless of circumstances. He did not answer me right away, but he went deep into himself. Then he said to me, "You have asked the most serious question. I cannot give you the answer all at once, in a way that will make much sense to you.

But it was not always this way with me. I was run out of my hometown because of the evil things I did. I was truly a lost soul. You might say that I was dead, but now, thank God, I am alive. I was introduced to a group of people whom I would like you to meet. We meet up each week after the sabbath is over and we pray together. Perhaps you would like to join us, and bring your family? The women pray with us as well."

I should have known when he said they gather after the sabbath has ended, that they were your people, Thomas, but I didn't put it together. There are so many sects and religious fanatics around these days.

So, the next week, our family went with them. How shall I describe it to you? It was so ordinary, and yet so remarkable. There were about a dozen adults there and many children scurrying about, playing. We met at the home of one of the members. I recognized a few whom I'd seen at the market. There was quite a mixture of people. Some who were wealthy and others who were certainly poor. But they did not hold these distinctions between them. Instead, each greeted the others warmly. We were welcomed immediately and felt right at home. Their hospitality was remarkable, and their joy was clear.

We shared a meal of bread and porridge. We sang psalms together and joined in prayer. Then we heard lessons from the law and the prophets, and different persons shared from their own life story, how they affirmed that Jesus was the Christ, and that he had risen from the dead.

As soon as I realized these were your people, Thomas, I became very uncomfortable, yet I was still drawn to them. The oddness of their belief in a crucified man rising from the dead and being the son of God, seemed insignificant beside the joy and love and peace that radiated from this group.

After the readings and reflections on the Scriptures were completed, we sang again. After a period of silence, each, in turn, began to share their needs. They shared where they had gone wrong in the previous week, and then they confessed their sins to one another, and prayed for each other's deliverance. I was moved by the trust and tenderness that was shown in this time. They also shared their victories and how God had been active in healing them. Truly, forgiveness and acceptance and healing were present in that fellowship.

Finally, I felt that I must speak. I told them I was your brother, but explained that you had been unable to convince me that Jesus was the Christ and Lord. I told them that I was still not sure. Certainly, there was a spirit about them. They had surely experienced something that was very real to them, and I experienced something of it as well.

Stephanus answered me. "Your heart has given you a testimony. We are glad that we have been a part of it. Your head needs time to catch up with what the Spirit has told you. I am confident that the God who raised Christ from the dead is at work in you. I do not fear the outcome of God's hand in your life. It is hard for us to accept things from our families sometimes - perhaps there is a message that Thomas could not communicate to you." I thanked him for his words and became quiet.

A loaf of bread and a cup of wine were brought forth and one of the fellowship offered a prayer in remembrance of Christ, crucified and risen. He said that the bread was a sign of his broken body, and the wine a sign of the blood he shed on behalf of sinners like us. And as he broke the bread and all of us ate, I came to see, through the love these people shared with me and my family, the love that God showed for us on that cross at Calvary. I began to know that I was not alone in a cruel and meaningless world, but that God shares in this world with me, and recreated the world when he overcame even death, by raising Christ from the dead.

And then the cup was offered, the cup of a new covenant, a new reconciliation with God, a new beginning. God's forgiveness, that overcomes the past was made clear to me in this group of strangers who were joined into a community of witnesses to that forgiveness. The whole experience revealed to me what had been revealed to you...the reality of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.

No longer did I need to be convinced, only directed and led to a deeper fellowship with these believers and a closer walk with him who leads them. Like you, I needed more than words. I needed to **know** the risen Christ.

Your brother,

James

As Thomas proclaimed in our gospel lesson, when he answered Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" And this, my dear friends, is why Easter makes a difference. Because of the resurrection, we, like Thomas and James, can recognize Jesus as our personal "Saviour".

Just as he was able to pass through the locked doors of the room where the disciples were hiding, Jesus is able to enter locked and doubting hearts. It is when we realize that the scarred hands are a perpetual reminder of the price paid for our redemption, that doubt vanishes.

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son. Amen