

4-26-09

## The Controversial Issue Among unbelievers

Luke 24:36-48

Seeing is believing. That is the rationale of some unbelievers who think they are being clever. On the other hand, there are people of faith who say instead, "To believe is to see." Is seeing believing or can we see when we believe? That is the central conflict between believers and unbelievers.

Most people believe that seeing is the only way to prove that something exists. But that is a narrow-minded view of knowledge. Seeing is only one of the five senses that we can use to explore and understand the world. Using sight alone, we can know something on its surface but not necessarily the essence of it.

The Disciple Thomas was one of those "seeing is believing" people. The name "Thomas" means "the doubter," and this name described Thomas well. Thomas couldn't believe anything without seeing it himself. He was not with the disciples when Jesus first came to them. So when the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

Honest doubt can open the door to the room of faith. However, consistent doubt as a state of mind keeps the mind closed to anything outside of prior experiences. The poet Kahlil Gibran wrote: "Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother. Doubt is a foundling unhappy and astray, and though his own mother who gave him birth should find him and enfold him, he would withdraw in caution and in fear." Doubt will not know truth till his wounds are healed and restored.

Thomas doubted until Jesus appeared to him, and he was able to put his own hands into Jesus's wounds. He was a slave to his unbelief even in the presence of Jesus. Only after he was satisfied with the evidence was he free to believe and hope, like the others.

There was a theological theory in the early Church, called "Docetism," that claimed that Jesus's humanity and sufferings on earth were not real. Under this theory, Jesus's resurrection was not real either, but an illusion. Thomas was a man of Docetism at first, but later he believed that Jesus had truly resurrected.

The story in today's scripture reading, Luke 24:36-48, took place on the evening of the first Easter among Jesus's disciples. There is a Korean proverb that says "the tiger appears when you talk about him." Just like the proverb, the risen Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples while they were talking about him. He appeared among them, saying, "Peace be with you," but they were still terrified. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

The Lord said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and

still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then they all believed. Both John and Luke place this appearance on the evening of the day that Jesus was resurrected. John tells us "the doors were shut...for fear of the Jews", and that suddenly "Jesus...stood in the midst of them." Jesus's first message to the disciples was one of comfort, courage, and hope. "Peace be unto you," he said. But still the disciples were terrified and thought they had seen a ghost.

Interestingly, before Jesus's appearance, the disciples had just been discussing the reports of His resurrection. They must have been excited, and hoping that He would reappear to all of them. But despite their joy and their hope, they were terrified when He suddenly appeared. From the disciples' point of view, their reaction was perfectly normal. All the doors were shut, and no one saw Jesus enter. He just appeared out of nowhere. The only possible explanation was that this was a ghost.

Hearing about the resurrection of Jesus and directly encountering the resurrected Jesus are two totally different experiences. Because Jesus's appearance was a supernatural event, they were all frightened. But supernatural events can and do occur in our everyday faithful lives. We call these happenings miracles. In the Old Testament, Job confessed to God how ignorant he was of God's doings, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you." (Job 42:5)

Our tendency to doubt is influenced by our prior experiences, particularly negative experiences. I read about a man who died because he refused to take penicillin. His doctors told him that the drug would cure his infection, but he was suspicious and could not be convinced. He had seen a soldier die of shock after a penicillin injection, and nothing that his doctors, friends, or family said could convince him that the drug was safe. He would not take the medicine. His friends and his family all would have gladly taken the penicillin for him. But nobody could do it for him. He needed to do it himself, personally.

Faith is like that. No one can do it for you. People can tell you about Christ and his power to heal. They can give you convincing materials. They can beg you and plead with you and reason with you. But in the end, faith is personal. It is a personal decision to accept Christ into your life, a personal commitment to receive Christ within.

"Nevertheless" is the theme for the believer. Truth seems powerless compared to the sword of the tyrant. Nevertheless, truth triumphs over the tyrant. Love seems weaker than evil. Nevertheless, the power of love overcomes evil. Don't give up your love toward God and your neighbor. Don't give up your good deeds because it seems like a waste of your energy. Your faith may seem small compared to the larger forces of the world. Nevertheless, it will bring its fruit when the time comes.

Did you know that Beethoven's teacher said that he was hopeless as a composer and Caruso's teacher said that he really didn't have a voice at all, and Thomas Edison's teacher said he was not smart enough to learn anything?

Did you know that the editor of the Kansas City Star fired a young cartoonist named Walt Disney, saying he couldn't draw and wasn't creative? Did you know that Albert Einstein couldn't speak until he was four years old, and that his teacher described him as "mentally slow, unsociable and adrift forever in his foolish dreams"?

Another story occurred on that first Easter day. Two disciples, Cleopas and Simon, were walking down Emmaus Road in a sorrowful mood. It was Easter afternoon. They knew about the crucifixion, but not about the resurrection. They were disappointed, disillusioned, heartbroken, and hopeless. They may have been thinking: "We thought he was the one to save us. We should have known this wouldn't work. It was all too good to be true – too idealistic – and now it's over." But that wasn't the end of the story. The risen Lord came to them, and walked with them, and resurrected them out of the tomb of disillusionment.

Ignacy Paderewski was Poland's most famous pianist and third prime minister. He wished to cultivate music and art in rural Poland, and scheduled a concert in a small village. One young mother came to the concert with her son, to encourage his progress at playing the piano.

On the night of the concert, the mother and her son went to the concert hall, found their seats, and admired the grand piano on the stage. The mother found a friend in a seat nearby, and starting talking with her. While talking to her friend, she didn't notice that her son had wandered away. When the spotlight came up and the audience looked at the stage, they saw a ten-year-old boy at the piano, playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

His mother gasped. The stagehands headed for the boy. But suddenly Paderewski appeared on stage and waved them away. The master pianist quickly moved to the piano, stood behind the little boy, and whispered to him, "Don't quit. Keep playing!"

Then he leaned over and started playing some bass notes with this left hand. Then he reached with his right hand and added an obligato as the boy continued to play.

Together, the master and the young student played beautiful music for the crowd.

Our lives are also transformed by the strong voice of the Master, who surrounds us with his love and whispers in our, "Don't quit! Keep on playing!"

I have two messages for you today. First, don't quit! Keep your faith! You may not have the perfect rationale for your belief. Nevertheless, keep on trusting in God. You have heard the goodness of God, now you will see the goodness of God with your eyes.

You have heard that Jesus was resurrected, but now you may encounter the resurrection in your own life.

Second, show the cross of love that you bear, and show your hands and feet that are marked with nails, when unbelievers ask you for proof. Lip-service won't work. Just saying the words is not enough.

The cross is now a symbol of triumph. But it used to be the symbol of loss, failure, and despair. Wake up from your night of doubt, full of worries from yesterday. And see this new day, not only using your eyes, but also with your open mind that can see that the risen Lord is with you.