

Seeing Jesus

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, April 19, 2009.

“We have seen Jesus!” “If you believe that, then I have a bridge I want to sell to you.” We humans value being careful and prudent thinkers. We want to trust people, but we don’t want to be gullible. We rightly think it’s important to be knowledgeable about things and to make informed decisions. Especially when we are in a vulnerable emotional state, it is wise to be wary of being duped or misled. When we have just lost a job, we are wise to be suspicious of someone who offers us a job that is “too good to be true.” When Hurricane Katrina ripped New Orleans apart, the place was swarming with roofers who couldn’t roof a decent doghouse but who could talk fast, make money fast, and disappear fast.

On the other hand, we also value the art of creative foresight. We want to be able to envision an improbable reality and make it happen. How else can we create something new unless we first believe we can do it, before seeing what is, as yet, unseeable? From inventing heated driveways to building the Roebling suspension bridge, from eradicating smallpox to electing an African American president, our grandest achievements are often made up of believing that we can do what has not yet been done.

And so we come to Thomas. Thomas wants to see Jesus. Hearsay isn’t enough for him. Can you blame him? In some way, he speaks for us. We too want to see Jesus. We don’t want to just hear about Jesus. That’s why we are here. Unless he sees a concrete sign of Jesus, he would not be satisfied with just hearing the words.

But Thomas doesn’t want to see any old Jesus. He does not want to see or hear about a spiritual Jesus—that would be a ghost, after all. He wants the wounded Jesus that he knew all the way up until his death. He wants to see a concrete sign of the Jesus he knew. He wants to see the marks that would identify Jesus as Jesus. And what are those marks? Not a glowing face, a halo around his head, magic hands. The marks that he wants to see are the wounds—from the nails in his hands and the sword in his side. In what I think was a profound insight, Thomas wanted to be with the Wounded One who suffered for us and suffered with us. And when he does see the marks of that Jesus, it is then that he recognized the divine Jesus.

We too want to see Jesus. That’s why we are here. The world wants to see Jesus. The world looks to us, his body, his church, for a sign, the marks that identify him as “My Lord and my God.” What marks of Jesus do we show to the world? What of Jesus do we show? Like Thomas, like us, the world also says, “Unless I see the marks of Jesus in this world, I will not believe.” And like Thomas, we too doubt when we don’t see Jesus as he is lived out in our world. Did we not ask, “Where is God in the midst of 9/11?” and “Where is God when I lost my job or my home or my loved one?” What is the sign, the identifying marks that say, “My Lord and my God”?

Here's what the marks are. The marks are the wounds we bear to heal a wounded and a broken world. They are the sacrificial love that puts serving others over serving myself. They are the giving-up of some of our private privileges and our hoarded goods so that others can have more. Maybe the wounds are a little more like that community in Acts—less acquisitive, less possessive, less individualistic, less competitive, more free, more trusting in God's abundance and in one another's generosity. And yes, we might doubt that this can happen until we see the sign of its reality, just as Thomas doubted until he could see the sign of Jesus' reality. But we can also work to create that reality.

So Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." He does not condemn Thomas' caution, which was, after all, quite sensible. In fact, I think that Jesus affirmed and blessed both the ones who believe through seeing, and the ones who believe through trusting.

Because in this world, we need both. We need the truth-seeker. This is the one who needs to see and who insists that the world show its marks of Jesus. We need the one who challenges us to show the proof: "Where's the beef? Show me the money." Show me Jesus. Show me Jesus in what you do, how you treat people, how you bring hope and justice to Cincinnati. That person holds us to task, holds us up to our promises, and calls us to live out in our lives what we profess in our faith.

We also need the truth-maker, the one who can believe before seeing, who forges ahead in faith and hope, but who knows what *must* be true. We need the one who calls us to make a world according to God's image, make a community on earth that mirrors God's beloved community, believing in Jesus even if we have not yet seen it. Our task, after all, is to create not just warm driveways and suspension bridges. It is to create warm welcomes and bridges of reconciliation. Our task is to work for dignified work, decent housing, sustainable environments—the kind of world and a community that Jesus lived and died for. Our task is to see and to serve Jesus in each other. And then we can truly say, We have seen Jesus! Blessed are you!