**Sunday 19th April Sermon – John 20:19-31**

Appropriated from Rev. Brian D. Kuyper, Granum, Alberta. <https://www.crcna.org/resources/church-resources/reading-sermons/you-dont-always-have-see-believe>

We have all probably heard the phrase “seeing is believing.” We probably know what this refers to. In order to fully accept something to be true, someone needs to see it with their own eyes. We tend to doubt about fantastic ideas and can become sceptical about any new or different things.

We live in a current society and culture that need to have the cold hard facts in front of us, or proof in what we are being told. When we talk about proof, we generally mean that we need scientific proof. We need genuine, physical evidence of what you are trying to get us to believe. That is one of the reasons why many people say they don’t believe in God. They say, “You can’t give me physical proof that he exists, therefore, I can’t believe in him.” I think that when we are really hard pressed or struggling, we too need to admit that we all have had our times doubts at some point.

Here it is almost 2000 years since Jesus’ resurrection, we find ourselves now a week out from the Holy Week. We celebrate Easter each year and although this year has been different due to the restrictions, we still get excited and rejoice in hearing the good news that Jesus was risen from the grave on that Easter morning.

But how many of us actually believe this? There are many people who believe in the resurrection. But there are also many who don’t. Even some people who call themselves Christians don’t necessarily believe that Jesus ‘actually’ rose from the grave. For them, it is a nice story, but they don’t really accept it as true. They think that Jesus only “appeared” to have risen, that Jesus appeared to the disciples in a different manner. But to them, it really doesn’t make much difference to their faith if he did in fact rise from the grave. But in reality, this is crucial to our faith. If Christ did not rise from the grave, then there is no victory over sin and death. Yet there are many people who are skeptics.

Within our reading today from John 20:19-31 we see that Jesus appears to the disciples on a number of occasions. However, when Jesus appeared the first time, Thomas was not with the others, and did not believe that Jesus appeared. It is from Thomas’ disbelief that when someone who doubts anything gets nicknamed: “Doubting Thomas.”

This nickname has stuck with the disciple Thomas ever since Jesus’ resurrection. This is an unfortunate nickname that only Thomas inherited. He has had a bad rap ever since. But Thomas isn’t the only one who didn’t believe. There was doubt on the part of the other disciples as well. This can be seen in Mark 16:11-14 and Luke 24:11-12 we see that the other disciples have also doubted about Jesus’ return at various points during the week.

One of the interesting Easter stories is Jesus’ appearance to Mary Magdalene. In this encounter, Jesus tells Mary to go to the disciples and tell them he has in fact risen from the dead and that he is soon returning to his Father. In John 20:18 we read, “Mary Magdalene, went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her.” We see in the other gospels that Peter and John run to the tomb themselves, so that they can see the proof of the empty tomb.

Instead, in the John passage, John immediately introduces us to the Scripture passage for today. This passage tells us that the disciples (probably more than just the ten) were meeting together. When you read Acts 1:14, we find out that the women, Mary Jesus’ mother, his brothers and probably others were there in the upper room together. This group of disciples is reported to have been in the room “with the doors locked for fear of the Jews.” These people had just seen their close friend and leader arrested, put on trial and crucified. They fled the scene in fear for their own lives. They were now hiding for their own safety. They feared that the Jewish leadership would come after any followers of this man Jesus. It was incredibly tense. If they killed Jesus for treason, then they might come after those who followed him and listened to what he taught.

Our passage doesn’t just stop with them hiding in fear. But instead it tells us, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” (v19) Somehow Jesus was able to stand in their presence and give them a common greeting. This greeting probably calmed the disciples down a bit. Can you imagine, the one whom you ran from on the night of his arrest is now standing with you? Can you imagine the scolding they could have received? Instead Jesus says, “Peace be with you!” After greeting them, Jesus, “showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.” Wiersbe states in his commentary that Jesus needed to show the disciples proof of his resurrection, so he appeared to them in is resurrected body, still with the pierced hands, feet and side. Jesus allowed them to touch his hands, feet and side so that they could truly believe that he had risen.

We don’t read in the Bible anywhere that the disciples got overly excited when Mary reported that Jesus had appeared to her. We don’t read that they immediately jumped for joy when they saw Jesus in their presence. Instead, Jesus had to show them his hands and his side. When they saw the marks on his hands and side, they knew that it was truly him. It wasn’t just a ghost or some sort of vision. It was truly Jesus. He had in fact risen from the grave. When they saw him, then they were overjoyed. This happened, throughout the different times that he made appearances before the disciples in the following week of Easter.

At their response, Jesus again says in verse 21, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Wiersbe states that Jesus is commissioning them to do his work. The Father sent him, so now in return he is commissioning them to carry on his work. He breathes on them the Holy Spirit to lead them in carrying on his work.

Wow, what an amazing time! What an experience! Can you imagine the emotions they must have felt? This all happened only three days after Jesus was crucified. They had just witnessed Jesus suffering on the cross. They had seen him pierced. They had seen him bloody and hanging on the cross. They had seen his dead body taken off the cross. Now, only a few days later, he is standing in their presence and greeting them and sending them out to carry on his work.

Just imagine the following scenario when the other disciples saw Thomas: The other disciples bouncing up to Thomas in excitement and probably all trying to talk over one another, massive smiles on their faces. “We have seen the Lord!” “Yeah right,” Thomas responds. “No seriously, we have seen the Lord! He spoke to us!” “Yeah right,” Thomas replies; “I will believe it when I see it.” “No seriously! We have seen the Lord. He spoke to us! He even breathed the Holy Spirit onto us!” And again Thomas would say, “Okay guys, right?! Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

Can you blame Thomas? Jesus was crucified before his eyes. Now you are telling him that he is alive? You can’t be serious. People don’t just rise from the dead like that. Indeed, we saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, but that was a miracle that Jesus performed. How can someone rise from the dead in his own power? It just isn’t possible. I can see how he would be sceptical. Even though they had seen Jesus rise Lazurus from the dead (John 12:1-9), people don’t just rise from the dead on their own. It would be hard to accept.

We read that a week later they were gathered in the house again (John 20:26). This time, Thomas was with them. We read again that the doors were locked, but yet “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” Can you imagine what was going through Thomas at that moment? “I can’t believe it. I mean I see it with my own eyes, but is it truly him?” Jesus speaks specifically to him, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”(v27)

Jesus knew what Thomas had said to the other disciples. He tells Thomas to do just as Thomas said he needed to in order to believe. Jesus seems to be addressing the doubt of all the disciples here. He knows what Thomas needed to hear. When Thomas hears this command we hear a pretty major confession by Thomas. He says with that grand confession, “My Lord and my God!” The sceptic isn’t as much of a sceptic as everyone thought. When Jesus spoke to him, he claims, “My Lord and My God!”

This short phrase has a lot of meaning to it. The word “Lord” is the equivalent of the Old Testament word “Yahweh” which is the name for God himself. When he says, “and my God” Thomas is making a divine claim. Not only is Jesus the master and teacher, but he is in fact God himself.

Thomas understands that the resurrection truly shows that Jesus is in fact God. Jesus said to the Pharisees in 8:28, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.” Thomas knew that since Jesus was in fact alive, since he had risen from the dead, he had to be God himself. What a tremendous statement of faith by the person many people describe as the doubter: “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus in response to this confession does not really congratulate Thomas for what he had said. In fact, it’s probably a rebuke of Thomas’ doubt, be it a gentle rebuke. There aren’t any harsh words, but Jesus says, “Because you have seen me, you have believed.” Fair enough. Those that saw him after the resurrection probably believed because they had seen him. We don’t hear of many that believed without seeing. But Jesus goes on, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Many followers of Jesus would believe without seeing. Jesus commends Thomas while rebuking him, but also gives a blessing to those who believe without seeing.

John concludes this story with the last two verses (30-31). He tells us the reason why he wrote his gospel. It tells us, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John wrote his gospel to people who probably never saw Jesus himself. He knew that some people would have doubts and questions concerning this Jesus Christ. Those who received John’s gospel never had the opportunity to see his miracles. They never got to hear what Jesus said. But John wrote down everything so that people would hear about who Jesus was, so that they might believe in him and that they might have life in him.

Earlier in John we read that Jesus is the source of life. It is only through his Father that anyone can get the “true bread from heaven.” Jesus said, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world…I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus is the source of all life. Jesus himself is the bread from heaven. John also wrote that “God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

This is the difficult part for many people today. They cannot see Jesus; they cannot see his hands or his feet. That makes it hard to accept that he died and was raised from the dead. Even the disciples had a hard time believing that he was raised from the dead. But he appeared to them. He showed them his feet and his hands where the nails were. He showed them his side where he was pierced. As a result they believed. They believed that truly he was who he was talking about. He was in fact the Son of God.

For us today we have to rely on the firsthand accounts of those who were there to witness these things. We have to depend on their testimony concerning Jesus. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” John tells us that those who believe will have life in his name. Jesus is the bread of life who died on the cross for our sins. When he rose again on the third day, he defeated death. Death was not able to keep him down. I can see how it would be hard for the disciples to accept this news. It isn’t every day that people are raised from the dead. But Jesus is no ordinary person. He is more powerful then death itself. He was able to conquer it.

It is hard for us to accept. We live in a culture that wants physical proof. We need something tangible to touch, to see in order for us to believe. But you don’t always have to see to believe. Having faith that Jesus did in fact do these things is what gives us life. As it says in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” We need to be sure of what we hope for: that Jesus did in fact die on the cross for our sins. We need to be certain that Jesus is the only way to the Father as he said in John 14. It is because of his work, we will one day be with the Father. We are certain that we hope for Jesus return, to take us to be with him in his Father’s house. We look forward to this because he has defeated death once and for all. He is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.