



THE CHURCH OF THE
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SEEING AND BELIEVING

John 20:1-10

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Dan Claire

I believe in Jesus' resurrection from the dead on the first Easter, even though I wasn't there to see it. I also believe certain scientific truths, because in my previous work as a scientist I saw laboratory results giving certain proof. "Seeing is believing" is the scientist's creed. What I hope to consider in this message is whether, as a Christian, I have any basis for believing in a resurrection that I didn't see.

Skeptics often use the phrase "seeing is believing" to challenge religious convictions, including the belief that Jesus rose from the dead. But if "seeing is believing" is our standard for truth, then there's much more than religion at stake. The testimonies of eyewitnesses are essential to the work of historians, and journalists, and judges and juries, just to name a few. There aren't many professions that have the luxury of being able to run laboratory experiments in order to see for themselves. Most everyone else depends upon the testimony of others.

There are six or seven written testimonies to the resurrection of Jesus, depending upon how you count. All of them have been collected into the New Testament portion of the Bible. Those who are unfamiliar with the Bible often expect it to be completely unprepared for the 21st Century, caught off guard by modern demands for evidence and proof. That's not the case, however. The Bible is indeed an ancient text, yet for all its foreignness, one of the things I love the most about the Bible is how much it respects us as readers, treating us as thoughtful observers rather than as saps. As readers, the Bible invites us to believe that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. But it's not an invitation to blind faith. The book is filled with *evidence*, so that readers might come to an informed conclusion.

For example, consider how the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews describes faith. At first glance, it reads as the opposite of "seeing is believing." Heb 11:1 says, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." Jesuit biblical scholar D. Bergant incorrectly and unhelpfully paraphrases this verse as: "Not-seeing is believing."¹ Here's why we shouldn't think of Hebrews 11:1 as advocating blind faith: It comes within a letter written to a community of Jewish Christians enduring challenges and persecution. It also precedes a long chapter—often called the "hall of fame of faith"—in which familiar characters from the Hebrew

¹ Dianne Bergant, CSA. "Seeing is Believing. Really?" *America*, August 2, 2004.

Bible are presented as *evidence*. What could be more heartening to them than to be reminded of people like Abraham and Moses and many others who also experienced challenges and persecution and yet persevered? The description of faith found in the letter to the Hebrews is neither the “seeing is believing” demand for proof, nor the blind faith of “not-seeing is believing.” It’s rather a way of “seeing *and* believing.” It’s an invitation—accompanied by thoughtful arguments and historical evidence—to see the world a different way, and in so doing to become convinced of things unseen, that is, to come to *believe* that God is active within our world.

John’s Gospel was written for *us* so that we might see and believe. John wrote towards the end of the first century, after many of his fellow disciples had already died. He knew that it wouldn’t be long before the last of the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection were gone. As one of the many who had encountered Jesus and whose lives were transformed, John wrote with future generations in mind, inviting us to believe in Jesus not in a blind faith kind of way, but on the basis of the evidence, particularly key miracles that John called “signs.” John conveniently stated his purpose in writing at the end of ch. 20:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).

John’s invitation to us as his readers is to experience the same transformed life that he and countless other Christians have experienced. John offers this gift to us through seeing and believing. His hope for us is that, by having read his Gospel and especially the “signs” that Jesus did, we would see the world in a different way, becoming convinced of things unseen, and we would therefore *believe* that God is active within it.

SEEING

My former mentor Dr. Francis Moloney taught me that the Gospel of John is a story about two primary characters: Jesus and us. As readers, we *admire* Jesus as the hero who does what we cannot do for ourselves. And we also *resonate* with the disciples, who remind us a lot of ourselves. It’s the experience of the disciples in today’s story that gives us eyes to see and believe. Let’s consider what some of these disciples saw.

When we last left Jesus, his dead body had been taken down from the cross and given into the hands of a disciple of Jesus named Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a wealthy Jewish man who had purchased a tomb near the Temple in Jerusalem. Even though he lived several miles away in Arimathea, he wanted to be buried near the Temple because of his belief in the Messiah and in the resurrection of the dead. It was thought that when the Messiah came, he would come first to the Temple, and then he would begin raising the dead wherever he went. So those who were buried closest to the Temple would be the first to experience resurrection

and meet the Messiah. To this day, there's competition for grave sites near the Temple Mount, where only the wealthiest people in the world can afford to be buried. It's safe to assume that Joseph had a grave nearby for the very same reason.

Nicodemus the Pharisee also came to help Joseph with the burial. Nicodemus was the one whom Jesus had told "you must be born again." Apparently this had quite an impact, because not only was Nicodemus willing to become ceremonially unclean touching Jesus' dead body, but he also brought about seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloe for anointing Jesus for burial. Seventy-five pounds! Think of the expense, and the challenges of carrying that much. Together, they took Jesus' dead body and lay him out on linen sheets inside Joseph's luxury tomb. Then they covered him with the ointment and wrapped the sheets around him, leaving only his head uncovered. Then they placed a separate, smaller cloth over his head, and then left the tomb to be sealed with a stone rolled into the entrance.

What did Joseph and Nicodemus see that led them to do all this for a man convicted and executed by the state? John doesn't explicitly say that they believed, yet something was at work in them. They had come to see the world in a certain way, such that they found courage to go to such trouble and expense and risk to show their devotion to Jesus.

The next disciple we meet is Mary Magdalene, or Mary "The Tower," which is what Magdalene meant. Perhaps she was from a town called Magdala. Perhaps she was really tall. Or perhaps she was remembered by the early church for her towering faith. We're not sure. What we do know is that she was one of many people whom Jesus had healed, and from that time on she followed Jesus wherever he went, including remaining with Jesus as he died on the cross. All four Gospels identify Mary as first to the tomb before sunrise on Easter.

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. (John 20:1)

What did Mary see there in the dark? She saw that the stone had been moved. And in this case, seeing is not believing. Take a look at Mary's response to what she saw:

So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:2).

What was the outcome of Mary's seeing? Not believing. She came to the wrong conclusion about what had happened. "They" had taken Jesus. "We"—presumably Mary and the other women who had gone with her—"we" don't know where they have laid him.

Simon Peter was the leader of the Twelve, and the impetuous follower who had promised more than he could deliver. Arguably, no other living person had been an eyewitness to more of Jesus' miracles. Yet after all that Peter had seen he still didn't understand. He didn't see in a

way that convinced him of the unseen. When he saw Jesus' arrest, not only did Peter break his promise to lay down his life for Jesus, but he denied Jesus three times.

What about "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved?" If we were to keep reading to the very end, we would know this disciple to be John, the author of this Gospel. Why was John reticent to use his name, and instead to describe himself in such a clumsy way? Was he merely being humble, as many have suggested? Perhaps that was part of it. But the more important reason goes back to John's purpose in writing, namely that we might believe in Jesus and have life in his name. Towards this end, John intentionally described himself as "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved," so that we might identify with him and be able to see through his eyes. John's self-description is a fitting way to identify anyone who comes to faith in Jesus. Are you a Christian? If so, then you're also an Other Disciple, and One Whom Jesus Loves.

So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. (John 20:3-4)

John was significantly younger than Peter, so it makes sense that he would be the first to arrive. And what did they see?

And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. (John 20:5-7)

Jesus wasn't in the tomb, but it wasn't empty either. What did they see? The linen cloths lying there, and also the face cloth, folded and lying separately.

The resurrection of Lazarus was the sixth sign Jesus had performed, and the last one before Jesus' crucifixion. In that story, Jesus commanded the people to take away the stone sealing Lazarus' tomb. And then after praying for Lazarus to be resurrected, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." When Lazarus emerged, he looked like a mummy, still bound in linen cloths, with even his face cloth still on. So the last thing Jesus said in that story was another command to "unbind him and let him go."

Why did John include all these details in the Lazarus story? Because he wanted us to draw the comparison with Jesus on Easter. What Mary saw early that morning led her to conclude that Jesus' body had been taken away. Among those who didn't believe in Jesus' resurrection, the "stolen body hypothesis" quickly became a popular explanation for what had happened. But think about it. If you went to steal a body that had been decomposing in a grave and you found it carefully wrapped in order to minimize the odor, would you first unwrap it before spiriting it away? Of course not. And would you go to the trouble of folding the face cloth? Of course not. Something else had to have happened. How else could you explain the stone having been rolled away? How else could you explain the absence of the body and the presence of the burial cloths?

BELIEVING

Take a look at John's response to what he saw that first Easter morning.

Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; (John 20:8)

John "saw and believed." What did he see? Not the resurrected body of Jesus, but the linen cloths in the otherwise empty tomb. Yet this was enough for him to understand and begin to see the world differently, to become convinced of things unseen, and to believe that God was at work.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, John ch. 20, the risen Jesus will appear first to Mary Magdalene, then to the disciples minus Thomas, and then again a week later, with Thomas present. Thomas, whose "seeing is believing" skepticism kept him in doubt, also will come to faith in the end. But Jesus will say to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29).

In saying this, was Jesus commending blind faith? I don't think so. Rather, he was calling us to believe in him according to the evidence as it is recorded in the Bible. After Thomas comes to faith, John's summary confirms the priority of the Biblical witness when he says, two verses later, "These signs are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

I have said that John wrote his Gospel with the awareness that his fellow eyewitnesses were dying out, and that's why he needed to point everyone to the enduring witness of the Bible. But let me be clear, I don't think it was John who came up with this solution, because it's a solution that is shared by every writer in the New Testament. All four Gospels record Jesus doing all sorts of things "in accordance with the Scriptures." The Apostle Paul also writes:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor 15:3-8)

Where did Paul and the authors of the four Gospels get this common idea of belief in accordance with the Scriptures? From Jesus, of course, who in every Gospel predicted his death and resurrection in accordance with the Scriptures. Jesus was of course demonstrating that his life and ministry were in continuity with the story of the Old Testament. He came to fulfill and complete that story. Further, Jesus was also showing us that he found the Bible reliable. It was Jesus who anticipated the problem future generations would face when no eyewitnesses remained. He solved that problem by pointing us not only to the Old Testament

Scriptures, and also to the eyewitness testimonies about him that would be gathered into the New Testament. All of it witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is why John wrote what he did. It's the eyewitness testimony of one whose life was transformed by Christ. Once again, John's purpose statement: "These **signs** are written so 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 recorded six **signs** prior to the crucifixion of Jesus:

1. John 2. The wedding reception in Cana, when Jesus turned water into wine.
2. John 4. The healing of the Capernaum official's son who was dying.
3. John 5. The lame man who was made to walk at the pool in Bethesda.
4. John 6. The feeding of 5,000 by the Sea of Galilee
5. John 9. The blind man who was made to see at the pool of Siloam.
6. John 11. The resurrection of Lazarus from the dead.

John loved sevens. There were seven named disciples in the Gospel. Seven Jewish feasts were mentioned. There were Jesus' seven "I am" sayings. Not to mention all the sevens in John's apocalypse, the Book of Revelation: seven churches, seven stars, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, etc. There's no way that John would end his Gospel with only six signs. What was the seventh sign?

Back in chapter 2, John described Jesus' dramatic closing of the Jerusalem Temple, overturning the tables of the money-changers and driving out all the vendors with their sacrificial animals. When the authorities challenged him, they asked (2:18), "What **sign** do you show us for doing these things?" (What a strange thing to ask!) Jesus answered them (2:19), "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The authorities responded (2:20), "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But, as John explains, Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body. And when he was raised from the dead (2:22), his disciples remembered that he had said this, *and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.*

What was John's seventh sign? Was it Jesus' destruction and resurrection in three days. Yes, but not only that, because John's emphasis is not merely on the events of Jesus' passion and resurrection, but also on the *word* that Jesus had spoken in advance. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" is part of the sign. It is the word that Jesus had spoken. John notes that it is in remembering Jesus' word that the disciples believed.

John returns to this same theme on Easter morning at the tomb.

Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. (John 20:8-9)

John saw the linen cloths in the otherwise empty tomb and he believed. He needed to see what he did in the tomb because Jesus' words to them hadn't yet made sense. But now, we who read John and the other Gospels have the benefit of their understanding. We're able to read the Scriptures, these eyewitness accounts and to see with new eyes what God was doing through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We can see and believe without having to be eyewitnesses to the first Easter. As Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

In the ancient world, space on papyrus or parchment was at a premium, so writers like John were careful to include only the most important elements in a story. If seeing is believing, then John should have left out 20:1-10 and included more sightings of the resurrected Jesus. Instead, John's first Easter story is one of faith apart from seeing, emphasizing a path to faith by seeing *through* the Scriptures. That's why John wrote his Gospel, and all the New Testament authors wrote what they wrote, that we might also come to faith and have life in Jesus' name.

I have been a Christian for many years now, and I still regard the Bible as the foundation for what I believe. It shapes my vision for everything. I see the whole world through the lens of Scripture. However, it's not something I think about very often, because there's so much built on that foundation. Those of us whose lives have been transformed by the risen Jesus are now witnesses who confirm what the Scriptures proclaim. He is risen, and my life is changed. He is risen, and my cup overflows with good things. He is risen, and our church is a haven of love and grace to everyone. The Bible is the foundation, but there is so much resurrection life built upon that strong foundation.

There are times when life looks bleak, when the world goes dark, and it's hard to hold on because my own experience of Jesus gets shrouded by pain. In such times, the foundation of God's word remains firm. This is the gift that Jesus gave us in the Bible. Even in the most difficult times, his word enables us to see the world a different way, and in so doing to become convinced of things unseen, to *believe* that God is active within our lives.

Praise the Lord for the seventh sign. Christ is risen according to the Scriptures. Christ is risen, just as he said. Alleluia!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever made a decision on the basis on concrete evidence? What about on the basis on blind faith? What about some other way? Describe and discuss your approach to decision-making.
2. Read Hebrews 11:1 and consider the context. Does it advocate blind faith? Why or why not?
3. Why did John refer to himself as “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved”?
4. Compare what Mary Magdalene, Peter and John saw at the tomb on the first Easter. What did they believe?
5. Read John 2:18-22. How did the (seventh) sign of Jesus’ death and resurrection incorporate the word of God?
6. Why did the New Testament authors emphasize believing “according to the Scriptures?”
7. How can a regular diet of meditation on the Bible help you see and believe?