

Seeing and Believing

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John 20:1-18

"...and he saw and believed; ..."

Easter

Movement 1 – What are you looking at?

What are you looking at? This is a loaded question. It is a question that can be taken in the wrong way as a challenge and a confrontation or as an honest inquiry. What are you looking at? Today, take the question at its surface value. Don't hear the question as a confrontation or as a challenge, instead hear it as an open and honest query. What are you looking at? What are you peering at, what do you see? What are you looking at? It is the question we ask of our children when they are intently looking at the grass, seemingly at nothing, but something must be there. It is a question we ask of the scientist peering in the microscope, or of the astronomer looking through the telescope. It is the question we ask of the art critic, the umpire, or the daydreamer gazing out the window. What are you looking at?

It is a question we can ask of the beloved disciple as he looks into the cave, it is a question we can ask of Peter as he runs into the cave, and it is a question we can ask of Mary, weeping outside of the cave, for all three see something that effects their lives, that effects our lives and we need to know what they see. What are you looking at?

Yet such a question only requires a surface answer. One could answer quite honestly what they are looking at, and not tell you anything. Ask an artist what he is looking at as he paints and he may say, "the street." Ask an umpire sitting behind the plate what he is looking at and he may say, "the ball." The question does not garner the information we are interested in.

Like the psychologist holding up the Rorschach inkblot test, don't ask, "What are you looking at," but instead you ask, "What do you see." What pictures, what shapes do you see in the blot? We ask this question with those "magic eye" pictures that were popular a few years ago. These were the pictures that looked like a mass of nothing, until you unfocused your eyes and looked in a different way, then you could see something. We need to ask, what do you see? The question is important because we could all be looking at the same thing and see different things. Many people could look at the same cloud and see different pictures and different objects in the shapes of the clouds. The poet and writer Henry David Thoreau once wrote, "The question is not what you look at, but what you see" (from *Journal*, August 1851). What do you see? In Harry Nilsson's classic and somewhat obscure movie, *The Point* the main characters are wondering in the Pointless Forest, trying to find a point to their lives when they are approached by the Rock Man who tells them, "you see what you want to see and you hear what you want to hear." In that poetic and prophetic line that main point of the whole movie is shared – people see what they want to see. It is like our life is a television and we are looking at it through the station that we choose to watch. We can see the world through the lens of Fox, or through the lens of PBS, and depending on which station we choose, we will see different things. So instead of asking, "What are you looking at," instead let's ask, "What do you see?"

Movement 2 – The Eyes of the World

What do you see? When you look at the world, what do you see? While we expect to have a number of answers, and a variety of visions, depending on what people are looking at, we

also expect to find some uniformity in the answers, we would expect people to be realistic and describe to a degree what they actually see. When we ask the question, “What do you see,” we expect a rational answer. I wouldn’t look at the wall and say I see pink elephants flying around. That isn’t rationalistic, it isn’t reasonable, and it isn’t what others can see. You may wonder if I was completely sane (if I ever was). It is an unwritten rule that we practice in the world, we see what is there, even if there is some variety, we still stay with reality. What we see is reality and reality is what we see. We believe what we can see.

This is an empirical approach to the world. It is the approach of John Locke, of David Hume, of Isaac Newton and of Francis Bacon. They advocated this idea of believing only what you can see; only what one could see was the reality and individuals were encouraged to stay within the reality. Until we could see evidence of other planets, there was no reason to believe that other planets existed. Until we could see the evidence of the laws of physics, they were merely ideas and could not be trusted. One of the best practitioners of this philosophy was the character, Data, from the television show, *Star Trek – The Next Generation*. Data was very matter-of-fact with his observations, he did not have an imagination to work with and effect his objective observations. If you were looking at clouds with him and asked him what he saw he would say, “a visible mass of condensed droplets or frozen crystals suspended in the atmosphere above the surface of the Earth.” This is what he sees.

We all, for the most part, work with this empirical epistemology. We all, for the most part, believe what we can see. While we would like to think that we have more imagination than Data, more often than not, we would lean toward the rational rather than the imagined. More often than not, we believe what we can see.

A good coach will tell an athlete if he truly “sees” talent, not just potential or imagined possibility for talent. Someone who has an eye for money will look at the bottom line of a budget, not considering the hopes, the wishes and the aspirations of a budget because it is with the bottom line that you can truly see the whole picture of the budget (or some would argue). If you are buying a home, you want to really “see” the home before you purchase it, so you have the home inspected from top to bottom. You can imagine that the home is in good condition, but what you can see with an inspection may very well be different than what you can imagine. What do you see? We look at reality and like a bucket of cold water our dreams and our imagination are awakened to what we can truly see with our eyes. We believe what we can see.

In the recent *Newsweek* article an atheist and a Christian debated over the existence of God. One of the main points of the atheist was that no one could demonstrate an existence of God. He would only believe what he could see.

What do you see as you look at the world? How far will you allow your imagination to carry you until you are realistic and accept what you see? What do you see?

Movement 3 – A Picture of Despair

All the followers of Jesus could only see hopelessness and despair. They saw a lost dream and a broken hope in the cross and the grave. It wasn’t just a sorrow that emerged because Jesus had died, but a sorrow mixed with a sense of disappointment over who they thought Jesus was in their imagination, in their hopes and in their dreams. Peter may still be remembering his bold words to Jesus in Caesarea Philippi, proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah. Peter may still be remembering the hope and the pride that welled up in him as he made such a bold and brazen claim, and now maybe he wished he could take those words back. Maybe he was now embarrassed with his claim. Maybe now he was ashamed that he placed so much hope in this

man. Maybe now he was grieving not just the death of Jesus, but the death of a dream that he connected to Christ. All Peter could see was despair and hopelessness.

The rest of the disciples also remember how they were so excited with Jesus' words, with his actions. As they followed him, watched him and listened to him, with Peter, they were more and more convinced that Jesus was more than just an ordinary man. With Peter, the disciples looked at Jesus and saw a dream, a possibility, and a promise for a better and a new life. The disciples saw in Jesus more than what others saw; they saw freedom, they saw a new life, and they saw the return of the reign of God. They had such hopes for themselves as they followed Jesus, as they took a chance with Jesus and committed their lives to him.

Yet when Jesus was taken to Pilate, cracks began to form in their foundation of hope. When the disciples saw Jesus whipped and beaten by the guards the pillars of their dreams began to crumble and fall under the pressure of reality. When the disciples saw Jesus led up the hill to Golgotha this vision of a new life, of a new paradigm, and of a new order with God began to crumble like a house of cards falling down. Reality once again set in, and they began to see Jesus as the rest of the world saw Jesus, as just a man, an ordinary man with delusional visions of grandeur.

Maybe, even as Jesus was nailed to the cross, some were still holding onto the hope that any moment Jesus would perform a miracle and bring all of their dreams to a reality. Maybe some of the disciples, and some of the women, who lingered at the foot of the cross, were holding onto the slim chance, the slight possibility that at any moment Jesus would perform such a sign that would make his past signs of changing water into wine, of feeding multitudes, of healing the sick, or of calming the wind and the waves seem small and amateur. Just wait, because the armies are coming. Just wait, because Christ is going to do something amazing that will surpass anything that we can imagine. Just wait, because this cannot be the end. Yet they saw a man hanging on the cross, and watched him breathe his last, and die. With their dreams lost, with their hopes buried, you can imagine that the disciples, the followers of Jesus could only see hopelessness and despair.

Can you see what the disciples saw? Can you see yourself looking at this event with the same eyes, with hopelessness and despair? Can you, for a moment, suspend the knowledge of resurrection, suspend the faith of Easter, and see with the eyes of disappointment and despair? If they were to believe what they could see, all that they had to believe was a broken leader on the cross.

It is like knowing someone who is a runner, and who happens to be the best runner in the country. Imagine this person is a superstar in his country and people flock around him as a local hero, as a celebrity. The people have placed a great amount of pride in this runner as someone who will be able to make their nation proud when he wins every race on the global level. Yet when the runner competes with other runners from other nations, when he competes in worldwide races, he loses and loses badly, coming in last. In an instant, the people from his country view him with different eyes, with realistic eyes of hope lost and disappointment. This may very well be the way the disciples were viewing Jesus, with eyes of hope lost and disappointment.

The commentator Gerard Sloyan says that Mary did not see with eyes of faith, that disappointment and despair may have clouded her vision, and the vision of the disciples. If James Cameron and his box of bones which he claims to be the bones of Jesus showed up to the disciples and the followers of Jesus, they would be ready to embrace his theories, and accept that

Jesus had indeed died. They were looking through the realistic eyes of despair. They had watched their dreams and hopes shatter into fragments.

You know what it is like when you are delivered a blow that shatters your dreams. You know what it is like when you face disappointment after disappointment after disappointment. When you have had the world crumble around you, and all you can see now is through eyes of despair. When you have endured trial and tragedy, when you have been beaten, wounded and rejected you look with vision of a pessimistic realism. It is no wonder that the disciples did not see and believe. It is no wonder that Mary did not see and believe, for all they saw was hopelessness and despair.

Movement 4 – The Event of the Cross

Yet the disciples are called to see the cross with new eyes. We are called to see the cross with new eyes. We are called to let go of the vision of the world, the vision of limitations, of harsh, pessimistic reality and to take on the vision of faith, a vision of hope, the vision of the Lord.

Mary sees so much that could lead her to believe. She sees the stone removed from the tomb and assumes that Christ's body was taken; she does not believe. She sees angels sitting where Jesus' body was laid, and assumes that they are the ones who have taken Christ's body; she does not believe. She sees Jesus standing next to her and believes him to be the gardener; she does not believe. It is not until Jesus calls her by name; it is not until she hears his voice calling her that she can now see. It is at that moment, as if the scales of reality, the vision of the world drops from her eyes and she can now see the promise and the truth of Christ; she can now truly see the divine. She can see and believe.

The beloved disciple (who we'll call John) and Simon Peter saw much that pointed to the resurrection and did not believe. The beloved disciple saw the linen wrappings lying in the tomb and did not yet believe that Christ was alive. Simon Peter went into the tomb and saw the linen wrappings and the cloth that had been placed on Jesus' head and did not believe. Yet then John went into the tomb and saw the linen wrappings, he saw the bareness of the rock, and something happened. Something came together and he believed. He saw and he believed that Christ was risen. He did not fully understand what it was that he was seeing. He did not fully understand what was happening, but his faith went beyond his reason, and he believed.

And with this faith, the cross looked different. No longer was the cross just the instrument of Jesus' execution, but it was something more. It represented something more profound than just the means of Jesus' death, for it was the catalyst of the resurrection. The cross looked different, like looking at a caterpillar and seeing a butterfly, they somehow knew that there was a beauty and a glory in the cross.

Can you also look at the cross and see more than what is there? On this day, on this day when we celebrate the impossible can you look at the cross with the eyes of hope, with eyes of belief, and with eyes of faith? The eyes of the world tell us that it is just a piece of wood and a reminder of the harsh ruling of Rome. The eyes of the world tell us that it is nothing special, and nothing powerful. The eyes of the world tell us to be realistic and rational as we look at the cross, but we know differently. We can see more. The theologian Paul Tillich described the cross as a symbol linking and connecting us with something greater and something more profound than just a piece of wood.

The cross is a symbol, connecting us to the passion of Jesus Christ. When we look to the cross we see the arrest and the scourging of our Lord. We see the trial and the condemnation of

our Lord. We see our Lord dying and buried. In the cross we see the pinnacle of hopelessness and despair. Yet in the cross we also see the empty tomb. When we look at the cross with eyes of faith, we also see our Lord, resurrection, we see death beaten, and we see the proclamation that Christ has risen! Christ has risen! Christ has risen indeed! Listen to the voice of Christ calling you to see and believe. The events of Good Friday are made complete today, and it is through the cross that we can see such hope and such faith. Look at the cross, see and believe. We are all called, on this day, with this faith to look at the cross with new eyes and to believe.

Movement 5 – Seeing Jesus with New Eyes

Our vision of Jesus is opened. Our understanding of Jesus, our sight of Jesus is changed and opened, and we can see Jesus with a deeper faith and a deeper understanding. Centering on the cross, focusing on the cross and our understanding of Jesus reaches back into the teachings and the actions and the person of Jesus. The hope that the disciples had in Jesus is renewed and is expanded. The desire that Jesus is more than just an ordinary man is met and is exceeded. We can now see Jesus with new eyes, with a new understanding, and with a new faith. The one who overcomes death, the one who makes the cross a thing of glory is more than just a person, but is someone divine, and now maybe for the first time the disciples and we can see Christ for who he truly is.

Think of Mary, running back to the disciples after finally fully seeing Jesus. Maybe as she runs visions and thoughts are also running through her mind. She remembers Jesus teaching from the mount and realizes that his words had more power than she could see at the time. She remembers Jesus calling the disciples to a deeper relationship with God and realizes that he indeed had the authority to call people to that relationship. She remembers when Jesus fed the multitudes and realizes how it was that he could perform such a miracle. Not only could Mary see and believe in the resurrection, she could now see and believe in Jesus God incarnate, the holy divine and fully human. The person of Jesus is now a revelation of God for humanity, and maybe now, Mary can begin to see.

Do you see what is revealed to us, that the teachings of Christ are leading us to the will of God? We see that the actions of Christ proclaim the coming kingdom of God. We see that the compassion of Christ is the compassion of God. We see that the life that Christ lives is a life that goes beyond death that breaks through death and becomes life resurrected. In the cross and the resurrection we are given a conviction to follow Jesus. We are given a reason to follow Jesus. Why do you follow Jesus? Because he is someone who shows me a way to live that goes beyond even death. I follow Jesus because he shows me the way to life. Through the resurrection the plot of Jesus' life is explained and revealed. See and believe in the resurrection and you will see Jesus with new eyes. Your vision of Jesus is opened, Jesus is revealed!

Movement 6 – Sharing our Sight with the World

We are to share our vision with the world. We are to take this sight and go into the world asking other people to see what you see, inviting others to look to the glory of the cross. Share this vision of Christ with the world.

Follow the footsteps of Mary and yell out, "I have seen the Lord!" Run with exuberance into the world shouting, "Jesus lives!" Share your passion, share your excitement with the world. Your vision will seem odd to the world. Proclaiming a resurrection does not make sense, but that is only if you look through the eyes of the world. But we are called to see and believe. We are called to see the cross and believe that our Lord lives. We are called to see the empty tomb and

know that death has been beaten, the despair of the world has been beaten and hope reigns; Jesus Christ lives! Let go of reason, let go of rational, and see the ways that Christ is working in our lives and believe. We are called to see and believe.

And with this passion, invite others to see and believe with you. With the passion of the gospel invite others to hear of the story of Jesus and believe. Show how your sight is different because of the resurrection. When you look with the sight of the resurrection you see what might be possible. You do not see the cross as the end but as the beginning. Take that vision to the rest of your life. Look at the hopeless situation as see a place where God will create hope. Go into the hopeless situation and try to make a difference. Feed the poor, advocate for the oppressed, and offer hospitality for the homeless. Immerse yourself into despair, and God will shine a light through the power of the cross. Look to the chaos of the world and see the creating hand of God. Show the world that even what seems to be hopeless can have hope; let them see and believe.

Love the individual who cannot love him or her self. Show them that if God could love even those who crucified Christ, than God can love us. Show them that if God could rise Christ from the dead, then God can look past our faults and failings and shower us with grace.

I heard on the radio the other day the story of a drug addict who turned his life around. He claimed that the reason he could turn his life around was that a woman saw him not as someone who was a waste on society but as somebody with promise and hope in society. This woman stayed with him, persisted with him because she saw in him something more than just an addict. She saw a person who could do worthwhile things. She saw and believed.

We are called to do the same. Look at the church not as a place that struggles with irrational ideas, but as a place that proclaims and continues to proclaim the glory and the hope of the resurrected Lord. Look to the work of our missionaries not as a futile, and miniscule work, but as work that is good and worthy because it is done based in the hope and the promise of the resurrection. Look at yourself as somebody who is loved and accepted by the Lord. No matter what you have done, no matter who you are, no matter where you have been, realize that you are loved, that you can be loved, and that you can be redeemed because of the power of our risen Lord.

Some may look and scoff. Some may look and say that you are being idealistic. Some may look and say that you are being unrealistic. But they don't know the power of the cross, the power of the resurrection and the power of Jesus. Your actions, your work, and your gestures of charity are not in vain. You do not have to cow-tow to the vision of the world, but are freed to live into the vision of the Lord.

Do you believe! Shout out your halleluiahs; shout out your praise because Christ the Lord is risen today. Shout out your glories; shout out your hosannas because the resurrection is real. Let not the world, let not despair, let not the darkness, and let not death keep you from singing and proclaim and living the power of the truth that we witness to today. Christ is risen! Christ the Lord is risen! Christ the Lord is risen today!

AMEN