

Seeing and Believing

John 20:1-18

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We're familiar with the idea that "seeing is believing." I'm from Missouri—literally; I was born and raised there. Missouri has a reputation as the home of people who need proof. It's called "The Show Me State." But seeing doesn't always mean believing or lead to believing. Sometimes we don't recognize what we see or we only see part of what's around us or we can refuse to accept what we see.

In this Gospel, it's more accurate to say that "believing is seeing." Or, believing leads to seeing. Seeing and believing do go together in John's Gospel. Vision, sight, seeing is often a figure of speech for faith and believing. Jesus, or some of his disciples, sometimes give the invitation to "come and see." That's an invitation to faith, to get to know Jesus, to believe in him. A dramatic example of the connection between seeing and believing is when Jesus heals a man who had been born blind (John 9). His physical sight was restored. Then the rest of the chapter shows how his spiritual vision increases until he says to Jesus, "Lord, I believe" and worships Jesus (9:38). All of that is connected to Jesus' saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12).

So, seeing isn't always believing, but it's a good illustration of believing. Sight or vision is very important to us. When I was about five, I had a "lazy eye." My right eye turned in. They tried the eye patch thing, where you cover your strong eye to make your weak eye work harder. So for a while, I looked like a little pirate with a patch over my left eye. But that didn't work, so they had to do surgery to correct my vision. Eye doctors ever since have told me what a good job the surgeon did in straightening my eyes. Then, when I was forty, I had to get glasses because my vision was getting weaker. Our daughter, Rachel, had to get glasses when she was in grade school. The day she got them, she was amazed that she could see leaves on trees and not just shapeless blobs. Vision is important.

It's also important to pay attention and be aware of what we're seeing, to interpret it and understand it. A while back I read a book by Alexandra Horowitz called *On Looking*. Horowitz lives in New York City and she decided to find out more about the block she lives on and walks around nearly every day. So she walked around the block trying to notice everything she could. Then she went on the same walk with different people. She walked with her toddler son and with an expert in typeface and fonts. Another was a geologist, another was a bug expert. She recruited eleven different people from a variety of fields to walk with her and help her notice what was on her block—or a similar setting in another city.

One person she walked with was a woman named Arlene Gordon who lived in the neighborhood. Arlene Gordon was blind. Alexandra Horowitz learned a lot about how a blind person navigates and gets around. As Alexandra left Arlene at her apartment, Arlene said, "Nice to see you." Then she went on, "There's someone in my building who asked me, 'How come you use that word, "see?" How can you say "I see it"? Well, I do see it. I said, 'see' has many definitions" (209).

In this account of the events early on Resurrection Day, people see a variety of things in a variety of ways. Mary Magdalene sees the stone rolled away from the tomb. John and Peter see the stone as well as the empty tomb and grave clothes. Mary then sees the empty tomb and some angels. Finally, Mary sees Jesus, but only recognizes him when he speaks her name.

After Jesus was crucified and he died, some friends took his body and placed it in a tomb. The tomb was a cave with a low entrance and several shelves or niches where bodies could be placed. A large stone was rolled in front of the entrance.

Early on that first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried on Friday. All four Gospels mention Mary as one of the first to find the empty tomb. The other three include other women with her, but John focuses on Mary. She had followed Jesus from Galilee and was present when he died and when he was buried.

She comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been moved from the entrance. She assumes that someone has broken in and stolen Jesus' body, so she runs to find Simon Peter and another disciple. This other

disciple is called “the one Jesus loved” which seems to designate the apostle John, son of Zebedee. Mary tells them that someone has taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb, “and we don’t know where they have put him!”

In that time, if you were making up a story like this, you wouldn’t have a woman be the first witness. Women’s testimony wasn’t usually acceptable in a Jewish court. Also, notice that Mary and the others don’t immediately think that Jesus had risen from the dead. Instead, they make the natural assumption that someone stole his body or moved it somewhere.

Peter and John take off to see the tomb. John outruns Peter and gets there first. He stoops over and looks through the entrance. He sees that the body is gone and sees the linen burial cloths lying there, but he doesn’t go in. When Peter arrives, true to form, he barges right into the tomb. He sees the linen wrappings lying there. He also sees the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. It’s rolled up by itself, apart from the wrappings. This cloth was about the size of a small towel and was probably wrapped around the chin and tied at the top of the head to keep the dead man’s mouth from falling open.

Peter sees all this, but there’s no indication that he believes yet. He will, but it’ll take a while. Is that where you are? Still trying to understand and to decide what to believe?

While Peter looks at all this, John also goes in. *He sees and believes.* What did John see? What did he believe? First, he saw that the tomb was empty. Jesus’ body wasn’t there. Then he saw how the burial wrappings were arranged. He realizes that Jesus’ body hadn’t been stolen. What grave robber would take the time to unwrap the body and neatly fold up the cloth?

What did John believe? Though his faith wasn’t fully formed, he was beginning to realize that Jesus was alive. He saw that the empty tomb and grave clothes weren’t evidence of a robbery, but signs that Jesus defeated death. Maybe some of the things that Jesus had said that hadn’t made sense were beginning to come clear. Like when waking up from a dream, John’s about to grasp the truth but his eyes are still cloudy and his

thoughts are still sluggish. He hasn't yet made the connections. He and Peter still don't realize that the Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament), rightly understood, pointed to Jesus' resurrection. John has the beginnings of resurrection faith, but he's not yet seen the Lord.

John's belief isn't complete, but it's there. Maybe that's where you are—you believe there's something to this gospel, to this Christian faith and life, but you're looking for clarity. In John's Gospel, "to believe" means to trust, to rely on, and "to be open to change and commitment" (José Míguez Bonino and Néstor Oscar Míguez, *That You May Believe* 85). John opens himself to something new. Maybe he doesn't know fully what's happened. But he's ready to accept the new challenge of an empty tomb and he discovers a new commitment to life.

Simply seeing the empty tomb didn't produce complete faith. It indicated that something had happened. But the disciples still had to find out what did happen. That discovery and more fully developed faith came when they met the risen Lord. But the empty tomb supports their later proclamation that Jesus is alive. If the tomb hadn't been empty, or if Jesus' body could have been found somewhere else, the message that Jesus had risen indeed would never have got off the ground. So, while the empty tomb isn't final proof of Jesus' resurrection, it is part of the resurrection's reality and it gives support to our faith that Jesus is alive.

The empty tomb helps us see the continuity in Jesus' story. The same Jesus, who was the Word of God in the flesh, who healed and taught and ate with all kinds of people, who forgave and loved, who agonized in prayer, who suffered and died on the cross—this same Jesus is the one who was resurrected and lives for ever.

While Peter and John return to the house, Mary lingers by the tomb. She looks into it and sees two angels. These angels are in the spot where Jesus' body had been. Their presence emphasizes that Jesus isn't there. They ask Mary, "Why are you crying?" She says that someone has taken her Lord and she doesn't know where to find him. Where do you look when what you love the most is gone?

Now Mary turns around and sees Jesus. This is the first appearance of the risen Lord to one of his followers. Mary is the first to see, not only the

empty tomb, but the risen Lord. She sees him, but she doesn't recognize him.

People often didn't immediately recognize Jesus in his resurrection appearances. Maybe his resurrection body looked different. As the empty tomb reminds us that he's the same Jesus, the appearances remind us that resurrection includes transformation. Jesus is alive in a new way.

Jesus speaks kindly to her: "Why are you crying? Who is it you're looking for?" She thinks he's the gardener and she asks where Jesus' body is. Now, finally someone can help her find the body and she can finish mourning properly. She hasn't yet grasped the fact that Jesus is alive.

Maybe that's where you are. Jesus often slips into our lives in times of sorrow and distress. When we wonder where he is, he's there, waiting for us to recognize him.

One of the keys to Jesus' resurrection appearances is that he didn't overwhelm people with a revelation of himself. He left room for recognition and response and faith. He still does. He comes to us in a thousand ways. He's with us always. But he rarely overwhelms us with a sense of his presence. He wants us to trust him, to believe in him, to believe his word.

As Mary questions the "gardener" about Jesus' body, Jesus says her name: "Mary." Whatever it was about the way he said her name, it got her attention. She looked right at him and now she really saw him and recognized him.

Jesus wasn't missing; he was alive! He hadn't abandoned her; he had come to her in a new way, with new life. Seeing him and knowing him made all the difference for Mary Magdalene.

Jesus tells her not to cling to him. His way of relating to his people was changing. They had to get used to the fact that he wouldn't be with them physically much longer and they would need to learn to relate to him through his presence in the Holy Spirit.

Then he gives Mary a mission. He makes her an apostle. He sends her to the other disciples with the message that he's going to his Father, who is also their God and Father. Jesus invites us to see him, to know him, and to enter into a relationship with God like the one he has.

Disciples have seen the stone rolled away, they've seen the empty tomb and grave clothes, they've seen and recognized the risen Lord. The empty tomb alone, without the resurrection appearances, could mean several things, not necessarily resurrection. The appearances alone, without the empty tomb, could also mean something other than resurrection. But together, the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus point to the reality of his resurrection.

A little later in this chapter there's another reference to seeing and believing. On the evening of resurrection day, Jesus appears to a group of his disciples who are inside a locked room. One of the disciples, Thomas, wasn't with them when the risen Lord came to them. You never know what you'll miss when you don't come to church!

When the others tell Thomas about it, he says, "I'm from Missouri! If I don't see for myself and touch his scars, I won't believe it." The next week, the disciples are gathered and Jesus again comes to them. He invites Thomas to look and to touch his scars. Thomas simply says to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus says, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29).

We can believe in the risen Jesus even though we don't see him. We believe when we hear his word in the gospel. We believe when the Holy Spirit prompts us and nudges us. We believe because of the witness of other believers. And in believing, we are blessed, we know the living Lord, the same Lord that John knew, and Mary Magdalene, and Simon Peter, and Thomas. The same Lord that countless others have known. He is alive. He is here. He offers us new life now and he promises us a resurrection like his some day to live forever in the world restored to what God intends.