

Easter 2
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Eyes to See, Hearts to Love

Wow, if I had been there I wouldn't have been like Thomas! Well, maybe I would have. I mean, just three days ago we all watched Jesus get crucified, now we're all just biding our time before we get rounded up as well, right? And then the reports that Jesus has risen come filtering in...but who believes women on these things? They're so flighty and unreliable! But the reports keep coming, and soon the men are talking about it, too. 10 of them are in a locked upper room and claim to have a vision of Jesus coming and just appearing in their midst. 10 people are a lot of witnesses...but it would be so different if I had really been there to see it with my own two eyes.

And we keep saying the same thing today, right? If I had been with Jesus in his earthly life I would never doubt. To see the miracles, to hear him teach, to witness what those guys saw, they certainly had the advantage. We're all Thomas, aren't we?

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher and theologian who believed that that kind of thinking is wrong. He had a way of writing his thoughts in terms of dialogues between fictitious people, and one of the issues he addressed is precisely this one. Did the disciples have an advantage over us? He argues that they did not, and to imagine that they did is to make a mockery of faith.

He perceptively notes that if the first disciples indeed had an advantage then Jesus was consummately unfair. After all, some people who met Jesus did not believe, what about them? And those who did believe on sight alone would be spared what we struggle with. We would have to be allowed some leeway, since we didn't have that advantage. So our efforts to believe in spite of not seeing would be cheapened by those who didn't have to do that. In fact, he argues that the story of Thomas teaches us something extremely important. Jesus did not ignore Thomas's demand, Jesus met it, but Jesus did not meet it like Thomas may have thought. Thomas was not given physical evidence on which to base his faith—that never works. Thomas was given an encounter with the risen Christ, just like the others. Kierkegaard argues that the only real faith is the one that has had an encounter with the risen Christ. And that kind of encounter is a gift from God, nothing we conjure up, nothing we do, but rather something we receive. Thomas received it. So do we.

What Jesus meant, then, when he said, "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe," is that physical sight is not necessary for faith, encounter with the Risen Christ

is, nothing more and nothing less.

So what does it take to have an encounter with the Risen Christ?

First, it is a gift. The resurrected Jesus was not like the pre-crucifixion Jesus. This Jesus appears behind locked doors, chooses when people will recognize him, shows himself at strategic moments. The resurrection works a transformation. It's not like people are saying on that first event, "Darn, where's Thomas?" This was the time for the gift for the others, not Thomas's. Thomas would have his moment, too. The risen Christ shows himself when he chooses, not us. The eye of faith is opened only when the gift is given, and not a second before or after. Ours is only to choose to use that eye or not.

Second, it is never cerebral or empirical, and always relational and mystical. There is scant historical evidence outside the New Testament that Jesus ever lived. Josephus, a Jewish historian mentions him, but Rome has no record whatsoever. Whereas there are locations identified as the places to which the Gospels refer, they are places of pilgrimage and faith. Their locations were not established on empirical or scientific grounds.

People respond to that fact in two ways. Some say that because there is no significant evidence outside the Bible for these events they are untrustworthy. That is to look only with the eyes of the head. It tries to support faith on empirical grounds alone—and fails. Check out Thomas—it doesn't work that way. Equally empirical are those who try to manipulate the evidence to show that these events really happened. Those who were there did not doubt they happened, and yet some believed and some did not. Check out Thomas—it doesn't work that way! The eye of the head will never see the Risen Christ for who he is. He is always revealed in relationship with us and to who we are. Jesus does not just unveil himself, Jesus meets us, and we are never the same for it. Those who do not rely on the eyes of the head and still believe are blessed...and that is true of all of us, even the first 10 disciples.

Finally, without a certain death and resurrection we'll probably miss it! Just as Jesus enters our world and meets us, so we, if we're not going to miss him, had better join his. It means dying to our ego-driven pride, letting go of the absolute rule of the self, being willing to leave our world long enough to enter someone else's. This feels like a death to the ego, but such is the price. And it will mean, then, a resurrection. You've met someone who changed your life forever, haven't you? This is the same, only much more so. When there is an encounter with the Risen Christ things are never the same again. We cross the Rubicon, so to speak. for the risen Christ effects in us a resurrection. Just as he is transformed, so are we.

What does that mean? When I met Karisse and fell in love with her it changed my life forever. It has demanded of me a lifetime of learning to encounter her in daily living, opening my heart to truly hear her, enter her world and be with her there. My ego is incapable of doing that, but my spirit is. When we encounter another and learn to love him or her, we live from the Spirit, not the ego, we live in love, not selfishness. Living in love turns our ego's world on it's head—in a good way—or blows it open, splits it apart to let the light of truth and love flood in.

As long as we cling to the rule of our egos our eyes will only be in our heads. As soon as we open our hearts to an encounter with the risen Christ we begin to see with the Spirit, and He appears everywhere. He appears in the face of a loved one, as the true lover behind the face. He appears in the face of a teacher as the true source of truth. He appears in the glow of a Spring flower, as the fount of all beauty. His presence infuses each of them with the light of heaven.

We often laugh at "Doubting Thomas," but Thomas merely shows us our own way. We don't take our experiences with God second-hand, any more than a lover will be satisfied with an intimate talk with someone other than the beloved. The disciples had no advantage, they encounter the gift of the Risen Christ, just like we do.