



THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

18 April 2004

Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 118

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

Don't believe everything you hear. Seeing is believing. A picture is worth a thousand words. I see what you're saying. It's like the great Greek philosopher, Aristotle said, "[s]ight is the principal source of knowledge . . ." Indeed, in the Greek language, the verb *to see* in its past tense form means *to know*. What's more, the Greek verb meaning *to live* is synonymous with the verb *to see light*. And Plato opined, "as the most spiritual sense, related to light, seeing give access to true being."

Thomas, aka, *The Twin*, obviously believed with Heraclitus, another ancient philosopher, that the "eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears." For Thomas, truth was not to be found in the spoken word. Unless something was verifiable through sight and touch – well, it couldn't be believed. That which couldn't be seen, that which couldn't be touched, need not, ought not, be trusted.

With this strong emphasis on sight, you have to wonder if Thomas or any of the people on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean could have any faith or trust in the God of the Hebrews. After all, the God of Moses, the God of the Older Testament, the God of Jesus was the *unseen* God who had commanded that God remain unseen, that no image of God's self ever be made. In certain times and places this was taken to mean that even the unutterable name of the Lord God was to remain unseen and therefore to not be written out. It was the *unseen* God of Abraham and Sarah who spoke the whole creation into being and declared it good. It was the God of the prophets and the ancestors who manifested God's self in a still, small voice rather than in earthquake, wind, and fire. No mountains to be seen falling, no tree limbs to be seen flying before the wind, and no great balls of fire to marvel at – only a whispered message on the breeze of a summer day. And the Gospel of St. John from which this morning's reading comes opens with a chant that proclaims for all creation to hear, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God – and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This word, of course, is, was and evermore shall be none other than the Christ in whose resurrection Thomas could not trust unless he could see with his own eyes and touch.

Think of voice, think of speech, think of the spoken Word. All of it comes out of nowhere and disappears into nowhere: speech rises up from silence and disappears into thin air the moment the word is uttered. And in the pre-technological world there was no way to tie voice down – it was as free as the wind – here and there and everywhere but not available to dissect, pin down, make captive. No, Thomas wasn't about to trust the *spoken* word, all the talk that the crucified one had been raised from the dead – and he especially wasn't going to trust a spoken word that had begun with the woman at the tomb – their spoken word bearing a message that was, at the very least, fantastic – and you know how those women are. And so we call him Doubting Thomas – feeling just a little bit superior because we of course didn't have to see the crucified and risen Christ to believe. Blessed are we who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

But not so fast. Christianity in at least the last couple of centuries has taken a direction that isn't many degrees removed from the culture that trusted only that which could be verified by sight. When we talk about various events in scripture, one of our first questions is "did it really happen in the way the story says?". *Did it really happen* is just another way of asking if something visible took place. If no one could ever

have really *seen* the Red Sea part, we would say it didn't really happen – that it was “just” a story – as if stories weren't real. And if, at the death of Christ, one could not see the curtain of the temple torn in two, if one couldn't see the sky darken and the earth shaking, we would say it didn't really happen. How can anything be real, reliable, true and trustworthy if it isn't or wasn't visible to the eye? This is of course the pillar upon which American Protestant religion is based. Unless every word in scripture records events open to vision, events that “really happened,” then everything falls apart.

But Scripture and the God of Scripture have a different idea. We hear in today's gospel that the final gift Christ gives to the disciples is the gift of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit isn't visible – Spirit means breath, *invisible* breath. Nothing to see. Scripture itself holds that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Inspired – a word that means *breathed upon*. All scripture is Holy Breath on a breeze – nothing to be apprehended by sight or by touch – the essence of Scripture *my friend[s] is blowin' in the wind*. According to Scripture, our faith itself is the hope of things *unseen* – and that which *is seen* is not – faith. And faith – our trust and hope in the invisible – comes through hearing, this from the mouth of St. Paul. And no lesser light than Martin Luther declared, “das Wort ist geschrien – [*cried out, proclaimed!*] nicht geschrieben – [*not written*],” the Word is a story told and not the written record of what was – or even is – seen.

Many of you, like me, have on occasion heard someone lament that a whole vacation, birthday, or wedding has been ruined because the pictures, slides, or videos have not turned out, have been damaged, or were lost. If there is nothing to see, no visual record, it is as if the vacation, birthday or wedding were erased from being, that what was real has somehow been destroyed. Nothing visible, nothing real.

The ancient Greek, *long-dead* poet Pindar says, “Blessed is the one who has seen.” The Crucified and Risen Christ *who lives* says, “Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe, yet trust.” But we are by nature believers only in what can be seen; we cannot and will not believe in that which remains unseen. How then are we to obtain the blessing pronounced by Christ in this morning's Gospel? For humans it is impossible. *But for God all things are possible*. So hear the Word of God – the very same Word that once caused and still causes all creation to come into being. Christ, the living Word on the wind says to you this day: Peace – relax – give up your striving – for I have given and I will continue to give *to you* the Holy Spirit. Forget your spiritual striving – faith is all a gift, and I give it freely. You shall have faith – you shall have trust – in me alone. I have promised, and my Word, born on the wind, endures forever.