



# Believing and Seeing

*TEXT*  
*John 20:19–29*

April 8, 2018 — Sermon by Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29)

It began in 2008 under President George W. Bush. The rural broadband telecommunications act sought to deliver affordable, reliable Internet access to remote, mostly rural communities across the United States. The act was reauthorized under President Obama in 2014, so that even more communities could receive Internet service.

As part of the story around the act’s reauthorization, a *New York Times* reporter went to the Mississippi Delta to interview residents. She explained to one older African-American gentleman what this meant. He was having a difficult time understanding this promised access to the Internet.

She asked him about his family, and he told her about his daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren in Chicago. She told him that through the Internet, he would be able to use a computer to see his children and grandchildren. He would be able to talk with them, and they would be able to see and talk with him. He was skeptical. “You mean

through the computer I will see and talk to my daughter and grandchildren?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “Through the Internet, which workers are installing now, you will be able to see and talk with them.”

The gentleman paused and looked down, then looked again at the reporter and said, “Shooo! Well, young lady, I’ll see it when I believe it.” *I’ll see it when I believe it.* I do not know if he meant to say the more typical aphorism, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” But he said something much more profound. “I will see it when I believe it.” Instead of seeing leading to believing, this man said believing comes first and leads to seeing.

Jesus was crucified, and his body was laid in a tomb. There is every indication here that the disciples are terrified. They are holed up in a house in Jerusalem with the doors locked. Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds it empty. She tells the disciples, and two of them, Peter and John, run to see. They find it just as Mary said, but they do not see anyone there.

Mary lingers and she comes face to face with the risen Lord, but does not recognize him until he calls her name. Then she goes and tells the disciples that

she has seen Jesus. But it seems the disciples do not believe her because they remain in the house with its doors locked. If they believed her, they would have left the house to go to the tomb to see if Jesus was still there.

It is night and Jesus appears to them in the flesh. He appears to them — stands in their midst. He greets them with the traditional greeting, “Peace be with you.” Then he shows them his hands and his side, and they rejoice.

Here is the sequence. The disciples are afraid and holed up in a locked house. Jesus appears to them. He stands in their midst. They do not rejoice right away. It is only after he shows them his wounds that they rejoice. Scholars believe this is because even when Jesus appears to them, like Mary, they are not certain of his identity. It is not until he shows them his wounds in his hands and his side that they believe it is Jesus. Then they rejoice.

But Thomas was not there. He was away from the house. When he returns, the disciples tell him what they had seen, but Thomas does not believe them. Thomas tells them that only when he sees the holes in Jesus’ hands and touches Jesus’ hands and his sides will he believe.

For this reason, he earns the title “Doubting Thomas.”

That really is not fair because it seems that all the disciples doubted. First, they doubted Mary Magdalene when she told them she had seen the Lord. Then they doubted when Jesus appeared in their midst. It was only when he showed them his wounds that they rejoiced and embraced him. It should not just be doubting Thomas. It should be the doubting disciples. That is why Jesus says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

The consensus among Bible scholars is that John’s gospel is the latest of the four likely written around 80 or 90 C.E., almost 60 years after Jesus lived. Many who walked with Jesus, who heard him teach and saw him heal, they have died or are dying. So now the church faces a struggle. How will people believe if they were never there ... if they never saw Jesus in person?

When Jesus says “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” he is talking about the next generation of followers and every successive generation. If a generation lasts about 25 years, then we are the 80<sup>th</sup> generation after Jesus walked among us. Jesus is talking about us. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.

It is no easy thing to believe in these days. There are reasons to doubt all around us. Daily we are confronted by our own struggles, by our own sin. Daily

we see evidence of brokenness and hurt and injustice. Over the weekend, we heard the horrible news that once again, children, women, men, all innocents, were killed and injured in a chemical attack apparently launched by the government of Syria on its own people. A group of young hockey players traveling to a play-off game was involved in a horrible bus accident in Saskatchewan and families and whole communities are grieving. And tomorrow public schools in Kentucky and Oklahoma will be closed because teachers there are tired of having their benefits cut and pensions endangered and weary of the lack of respect that all educators deserve.

Yet when you and I believe that Jesus has conquered death, when you and I believe that the tomb is empty, the resurrection is real, and Jesus is loose in the world — and by the grace of God through the Holy Spirit that healing and miracles are still being done today, 80 generations later — when we believe it, then we will see it.

My grandfather, my father’s dad, was dying. His body was riddled with cancer. Dad had flown to Los Angeles to sit with his father in his hospital room. He had been there for a week and was leaving late that night to catch the last flight to Seattle so he could preach the next day. Dad was pretty sure this was the last time he would see his father alive.

I knew that my father and my grandfather were at odds with one another for much of their lives, but I did not know

why. I found out later from my father and my aunts and uncle, his sisters and brother, that my grandfather was abusive to my father. When Dad was growing up, Grandpa would beat Dad and belittle him and ridicule him. He told Dad that he would never amount to anything. He told him that he was worthless. And when Dad was admitted to the University of California at Berkeley, Grandpa told Dad that the school must be a shadow of what it used to be to admit someone like him. Dad left the house when he was 17 years old, never to return. When we were children and visiting our grandparents, Dad would be extra protective of us — and now I understood why.

It was late at night, and Dad was sitting by the bed of his father. He told me he could tell that his dad was in pain. Grandpa had long since lost the ability to speak, but he was sighing and whimpering. So Dad reached over and held his father’s hand and started to stroke my grandfather’s arm, hoping to comfort him. This seemed to calm and help his father. Then in the quiet of that darkened room, Dad said to his father, “Dad, I have spent so much of my life hating you and being so angry with you. But I want you to know now, even as you are dying, that I do love you. And I pray for you every day. And I forgive you, and I ask for your forgiveness too.”

Then Grandpa’s body seemed to be hit with another round of pain, and Dad didn’t know what else to do. He got up from his bedside chair, and he moved his dad over on the bed and sat

on the bed and pulled his dad partly onto his lap and held him and stroked his head and rocked him, trying to ease his discomfort. Dad told me later he was surprised at how small and frail his father felt then. He told me, "I had spent so much of my life afraid of and angry at this man, and now he felt so light as I held him in my lap."

Then Dad said he did not know what else to do, and he knew he had to leave soon to catch his flight, so he did the first thing that came into his mind. He began to sing. "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home. Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home."

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The tomb is empty. Death no longer has the last word. The resurrection is real. The Holy Spirit is among us redeeming every broken relationship, every hurt, every tragedy. Believe it. Believe it. And you will see it. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.