

Reflection on John 20:19–30
Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrew's by the Sea Uniting Church

Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. The operative word in this sentence being, of course, “when,” *when* they saw, they were able to rejoice.

For before this moment they were locked behind closed doors, afraid that the fate of Jesus would be their fate as well. They were suspended in time between Jesus' suffering and death and whatever would come next. Where, after all, was this leading?

But then, despite the locked doors, Jesus came and stood among them. It seems he has changed somehow because, like Mary in the garden scene before this one, it takes a moment for the disciples to recognise the figure before them for who he is. But soon *they see...* and they rejoice... and they believe.

There is a lot of seeing in this chapter of the Gospel. Starting with resurrection morning through to evening in the section we just heard, there are five different verbs used to describe thirteen acts of seeing in thirty verses.

As we know from personal experience, there's a difference between seeing and *seeing*. There's objective seeing as in taking in something with our eyes, gleaning information about shape, colour, distance etc. But there's also seeing as in “Oh, I see...,” in other words, a revelation that comes when a shade is lifted, a lightbulb turns on and there is insight and understanding.

By his own admission, it is this kind of seeing that is the Gospel writer's interest and aim. *These signs are written down, says the Gospel writer, so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

But not all the disciples were in the room that day. Thomas was off somewhere, getting supplies or an update on the news for the group perhaps, and so he misses out. For this reason, *Thomas is our guy*. He is the patron saint, if you will, of all who were not in the room when Jesus came and who must believe without seeing. Like us.

The others try to share their encounter, their seeing with Thomas. But he insists, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands... and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

For those of us who must believe without seeing, we can take heart by the response of Jesus when he appears before the disciples again. Jesus does not scold Thomas—at least, not in my reading of things. There is no tsk-tsking or shame here for desiring personal encounter. Instead, Jesus says “Peace be with you... look here, see my hands... reach out... put your hand in my side.” And after the invitation to experience and behold, Jesus encourages, “Do not doubt, but believe.”

The text does not say whether Thomas touches Jesus’ hands and side or not, but we do hear his profound and heartfelt exclamation of love, “My Lord and my God!”

Friends, such a moving profession of faith is only possible through personal experience and relationship. As the Gospel rightly claims, we are among those who must believe without seeing—but believing cannot come about from an objective distance. Rather true faith comes about when the shade over our heart and mind is lifted so that we are illumined from the inside, able to perceive God in every circumstance and in all things.

In an article in the recent edition of *Eremos*, a journal that explores Australian spirituality, Philip Carter calls Jesus “the self-expression and self-communication of God,” who “meets us in our experiences of vulnerability, pain, loss and joy. And because of that intersection, faith will always involve questioning and struggle.”

To put it another way, life is full of dynamic, complex and rich experiences. Finding God in the mix is not always straightforward or easy and a Thomas-like response as we grope around in the dark is understandable. We may doubt. We may wish for more evidence. But a greater trust in God’s love with and for us comes not through objective facts, but through life’s experience prayerfully contemplated. Carter goes on:

“The knowledge of God is always going to be participatory, relational and therefore something experienced from the inside out. And all our experiences of God are indirect: mediated through our everyday experiences of ourselves, each other and life. We might say God is co-present in everything that happens, and in our everyday experience we begin to experience God as the very basis for our seeing and knowing and valuing. As the American novelist Jane Hamilton puts it: ‘For me God was something within that allowed me, occasionally, to see.’”

Jesus’ tender response to Thomas encourages us to reach beyond our fear and reach deeply into our lives that we might discover the sacred hidden everywhere and be able to say with confidence and love: *My Lord and my God!*