

BELIEVING IS SEEING

The first step to becoming a Christian is to believe. But that is only the first step. Once we believe we need to become a light to others, so that we will bring them to belief as well. This understanding goes all the way back to the father of our faith, the Abraham of Genesis. God said to Abram, "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you." God blesses us not just for our sake, but so that we may become a blessing to others. A faith not shared is vanity. To have a faith that is alive we have to share.

The author of the Gospel of John did just that. He shared his book of faith with all of us so that we would believe. He gave us two reasons for giving us his Gospel.

So that we may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,
and so that through this belief we may have life in his name.

Belief is not the end; it is the beginning of life in His name. We must believe, before we can begin our journey of faith. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John teach us the way of faith and the sacraments give us the power to keep us on the path. But, it is up to us to choose whether or not to live in His name.

Thomas had been absent from the first appearance of Jesus. When the disciples told him "We have seen the Lord", Thomas said in no uncertain terms that he didn't believe them. In a way, he represents all of us today that have to take the word of others in order to believe. Sometimes it is not easy in our broken world to be that trusting.

It took me half of my life to believe in a way that would transform my life, so I am not going to throw any stones at Thomas who chose not to believe for a just a week. Thomas was devoted to Jesus. Maybe he just thought that Jesus raised from the tomb was too good to be true. I can identify with that. Many times in my sin, I have difficulty believing too. Maybe that is why it took me so long to join the Church.

Fifteen years ago, I stood right over there, as the church received me into full communion in the Catholic Church, and last Saturday night I assisted at the Mass of Easter Vigil as a deacon when nine more people became new Catholics. The RCIA process opened my heart, and the Grace of God that I had resisted for all those years finally burst through my self-made dam. The grace that flowed forth from that moment has changed my life forever. In many ways, that day was the beginning of new life for me.

The Liturgy of the Easter Vigil is all about receiving new life in baptism. I had already received a valid baptism in another church, but I had not fully realized the potential of the sacrament. The seed had been planted, but very little growth had occurred. I heard the words, but I did not really get that through the Sacrament of Baptism, I had become a son of God through the wounds of Christ. It is kind of like receiving a gift card loaded with a billion dollars, but never taking the time to go shopping.

I love being a deacon. I love to offer a blessing and know that God will make that blessing happen. It is kind of like writing a check on someone else's account. I am amazed that they can't throw me in jail for that! Maybe that is why the priests with a little blarney in them always look like they just got away with something. (and I say that with affection!)

I would like to share with you one story as an example of unexpected grace. A woman came up to me in the link hallway just before daily Mass. She said that I probably do not remember her, but she was in the hospital a while ago, and both she and the doctors thought she was close to death. She had pneumonia and was running a very high fever.

When I knocked on the hospital door, she said it was okay to for me to come in. When I asked her if she would like to pray together, she said, "I suppose so", in a tone that told me she would really prefer that I leave, but she was too kind to say it. I began prayer with the Gospel about Peter's mother-in-law who lay in bed with a fever and Jesus came in and healed her. Tears came to her eyes. At the conclusion of the prayer I gave her the blessing, "May the blessings of almighty God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

come upon you and remain with you forever", and left the room. Sometime in the night, the fever left her.

God chose to heal her, and He allowed me to witness it, so that I would know that He is God. I had no idea what our prayer together meant to her until she stopped me in the hallway to tell her story. I could tell that she was still pondering in her heart what all of this might mean, and I could see that there was more than just physical healing going on here. I now understand in a more personal way that God makes our prayers effective in ways that we do not understand at the time. I had to wonder, was it I that blessed her, or did she bless me?

I used to wonder what it would be like to live in the time of the apostles, to see the signs and wonders of God. Now I realize that signs and wonders are all around me, if I have the eyes to see them. Have any of you seen the Planet Earth series on TV or in the movies? I think it is one of the most religious programs I have ever watched. The photography is absolutely stunning. Episode after episode reveals the amazing symphony of life going on around all of us. It is too bad that we live so much of our lives surrounded with all man-made stuff. We really do not get a chance to witness the fifth gospel in all its glory--the earth and all its diversity of life.

Yet all of the beauty of the earth is eclipsed by the beauty of the life in Christ given to all of us. As Saint Paul said, we have been given power to become children of God, and so we are. Jesus will come into our room even though we lock the doors. He will find a way to reach us. Maybe he will reach us through the sacrament of marriage, or through the eyes of a newborn, or in the throes of some deadly illness, but he will reach us. He loves us too much to give up on us. He loves us even more than our mother. He loves us so much that he will do anything for us. He is still giving His life for us, and to us.

The Jesus we have the most difficulty seeing is the one in the mirror. God's plan for the salvation of the world is more glorious than any of us realize on this side of the veil of death. We have the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and we have the Gospel of God's creation as a witness to the Glory of God, but we have yet another Gospel.

God inspires this Gospel with the breath of life that He gives us at our baptism, but he allows us to write the story. We write a page in the book every day. Every page describes our sorrow and our joy, our failure and our success, our despair and our hope. But hidden in our story is one common theme. Our longing for a God of forgiveness, a God who loves us so much that nothing else matters. Every once in a while a flash of inspiration lights up our story, and we believe. A new journey has begun.

So how about it. When you go to sleep tonight, ask yourself this question: Did I write good news in my book today? If the answer is yes, you have done your part this day for the salvation of the world.

Jesus offered Thomas an opportunity to touch his wounds and to believe. We too can touch the wounds of Jesus if we just open our eyes and our hearts. The wounds of Jesus are all the hurting children of God. Jesus endures that pain every day. Those of us who have spent a day trying to comfort a son or a daughter as they scream out in pain realize that agony. Jesus feels every cry from His children who do not have enough to eat. He feels every cry from the families without a home. He feels every cry from all the parents separated from their children by unjust immigration laws. And he feels every cry from the wounded and dying soldiers fighting for a cause that defies all understanding. Our opportunities to write good news in our book are endless. What will we write into our book today?

You see, the nails of sin are the cause of the wounds of Jesus. And the sins of omission are often the ones that hurt the children of God most of all. In our blindness, we so often choose what looks like the easy way out. We do not readily share our treasure or our time to answer the cries of God's children. Our usual excuse is I am just too busy to help, or I just don't have enough money to give. We do not take the time to really live in the kingdom of God. We do not take time to love as Jesus loves.

Thomas heard about the resurrection of the Lord, but he was determined not to believe it until he saw Jesus for himself. If we look with the eyes of Jesus, we will see his

reflection in the eyes of the poor. When we touch their wounds, we too will be healed. When we give a blessing, we receive an even greater blessing.

When He breathed the breath of life into us in our baptism, we too became a new creation. If we live up to our calling, God's children will never be the same and the Kingdom of God will be upon us.

We have just lived the Easter mystery through our life in the Church. So I ask you. What is lacking in the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of the world? It sounds heretical but I will ask it again. What is lacking in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the salvation of the world? The answer is our participation. For our salvation and the salvation of others, Jesus chooses to include us in His mission. The kingdom of heaven begins here on earth.

Like Thomas, we have to show up, or something is missing in the kingdom of God. Faith is seeing with the heart. It is only when we participate fully in the kingdom of God through word, sacrament, and service that we will see the one to whom Thomas spoke the words, "My Lord and my God".

As we prepare to celebrate the Sacrament of Eucharist, allow yourself to be like the John of Revelation, caught up in the spirit of the Lord's Day. Write some good news in your book of life today. If you touch just one life, it will be worth it. Who knows, the life you save may be your own.

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