

Seeing, Believing and Serving  
John 20:19-31  
April 23, 2017  
Confirmation Sunday

Nick Redmond  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is the 6th Confirmation Class that I've had the pleasure of teaching in my time here, and over those years I've noticed that each class has its own personality and traits that make it unique. From the beginning, I knew this class was going to be a bit different... Just two weeks into the class last September we all loaded up on a bus to spend a weekend together on our fall retreat. We spent time doing teambuilding games, talking about spiritual practices, and have some free time to get to know one another. Many classes in previous years have used the free time to explore the beautiful campgrounds and hiking trails, to play football, or to sit around the campfire. What did this class spend most of their time doing? Hanging out in the dark basement of the cabin where we were staying - playing with one of these – a bottle of Gatorade. The group invented a new game sliding half-filled bottles across the tables trying to see who could get it the closest to the edge. Strict rules were developed about how much Gatorade should be in the bottle, how you score points, and they even had an official referee and tournament bracket – congrats to Sean Kelly on his victory! The rest of the year with this class didn't disappoint - we've had a lot of fun together this year – and this sort of creativity and comradery has made it a special group to be a part of.

This year's class also had a weird obsession with the TV show *The Office*. I'm not sure how you all got into it – the show began in 2005 when most of you were just 2 years old. Nevertheless, it's a great show that I'm a big fan of as well. For those of you not familiar with the show, it takes place in the office of a Scranton, Pennsylvania paper company. The show follows the lives of employees working there as they experience a whole range of ridiculous situations. My personal favorite part of the show is the relationship between two of the employees in particular – Jim Halpert, a fairly normal guy – the classic “straight man,” and the easily perturbed Dwight Schrute, the “Assistant to the Regional Manager” who sits next to Jim. Jim loves playing pranks on Dwight is constantly coming up with new and creative ways to do so. Some of my personal favorites:

- When Jim takes all of Dwight's desk items and puts them in the vending machine – leaving Dwight to have to purchase every one of his things one nickel at a time.
- When Jim steals some of Dwight's letterhead, then convinces Dwight that he's receiving faxes from his future self.
- On the very first episode when Jim puts Dwight's stapler in Jell-O.
- When Jim replaces Dwight's desk and chair with cardboard and wraps them up in Christmas paper. Dwight doesn't realize it's not his actual desk – and it all collapses to the floor when he sits down on it.

In today's scripture passage, I imagine Thomas might also have felt like he was being pranked. In this story, we again have a small close-knit group of people who've been working alongside one another - the disciples. Just a few days prior, Jesus had been executed by the Roman government. He was dead, buried in a tomb, and all of the disciples had locked themselves in a house for fear of being crucified as well. Everyone but Thomas was there when Jesus then miraculously appears to them.

Eventually Thomas shows up – and the disciples tell him this incredible news. Yeah right! This must be the world's biggest prank – people don't come back to life. Surely they were pulling one over on him – the entire group was in on the joke, and Thomas wasn't buying it. Show me, he says. I don't believe you. I want proof.

When we hear this story on Easter – about a human being coming back to life – some of us are also skeptical. We feel like a giant prank is being pulled on us – like Dwight when he's being pranked by Jim, or like Thomas when he hears this unbelievable news from the disciples. Surely it's a hoax, a fairy-tale, a farce. It can be easy to get on board with the teachings of Jesus – sure, it's good to love others. It's good to try to help the poor. It's good to honor our parents and not kill or steal or covet. But those miracles – especially *this* miracle – can be such a sticking point

for so many people. Like Thomas, this just doesn't make sense. It just seems too impossible. We want to see proof with our own eyes.

At the same fall confirmation retreat, one of the counselors at the camp we were staying at led the group through an activity where they literally couldn't see. Each of them was given a blindfold that was tied over their eyes in a way that kept even the tiniest ray of light out. They then placed their arms on the shoulders of those in front of them, as they were led through the woods – relying on the person in front of them to lead the way.

Eventually, they reached a clearing and stepped into a roped off area between several trees. They were instructed to find a way out without going over or under the rope. They could ask questions of the leader, but only certain questions would be answered. They all stumbled around and as they walked around the perimeter it appeared as if the rope went around the entire area. There was no way out. Eventually, several of them discovered a secret way of moving one of the ropes to get out, but as soon as they left, they were instructed to remain silent to allow the others to try to figure it out. One by one, more of the confirmands discovered the exit. But there were still quite a few who were unable to find the exit – and none of their questions seemed to give them any helpful answers. They asked things like “can I climb one of the trees?” – “No.” “Can we lift others over the rope?” – “No.” “Where is the exit?” “I can't tell you.”

Eventually, only three confirmands were left – and they were very frustrated. One of them sat down on the grass in defeat. It was around that moment that one of the girls asked a different sort of question to the leader: “will you help me?” As soon as those words were spoken, the leader went over to her, and gently guided her to the exit. She was still blindfolded, but with his support, she was able to make her way through. Soon, the second girl asked the same question: “will you help me?” and again, he guided her toward the exit. Finally, the boy who had sat down, asked the same question: “will you help me?” and he too was led out.

In our faith, we don't always *see* the path ahead of us. We don't get easy answers. We don't get to see Jesus standing right in front of us letting us feel his

hands. But in the midst of our struggles, we too often try to go it alone. We stumble around in the darkness trying to figure it out by ourselves. We carry these heavy stones – these burdens that just keep wearing us down. When we experience questions, doubts, or skepticism, we start asking the questions like: “can I really believe this?” “Does God exist?” or “Why even bother with church?” These aren’t bad questions to ask –they *can* help us grow in our faith. But the question we don’t often ask is this: “Will you help me?” When believing in God, or the church, or *this* church is especially tough, we don’t have to just rely on our own faith. We can turn to this community – and the faith of those around us can help us carry our heavy loads. “I’m really struggling with whether or not I believe in God right now – will you help me?” “I’m just so pissed about the recent decisions at our church – will you help me?” “My marriage is falling apart and I don’t know what to do – will you help me?”

The deep questions of faith and life don’t have easy answers – we’ve talked about that from day one this year in confirmation. I don’t know the scientific explanation of how Jesus came back to life and appeared before those disciples. Biologically, it is unexplainable. Did Jesus’ heart start beating again? Were their neurons firing in his brain? Was it even the same physical body made up of carbon, oxygen and other elements? Or was it something else entirely? Something we can’t explain. Something spiritual?

I don’t know how the resurrection worked. But what I do know is that those disciples *experienced* Jesus in their lives. That people for 2,000 years after have had real experiences of Jesus in their lives. That I have experienced Jesus in my own life.

This past August, I went with a group of our 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders down to Chicago for a 3 day mission trip in the city. Many of these confirmands here today were on that trip. For the past several years, we’ve spent one of the days volunteering with Sarah’s Circle – one of our church’s mission partners that does great work in the city “serving women who are homeless or in need of a safe space.” Each year we’ve gone to their interim housing shelter to cook and serve a

meal for 20-30 women who are experiencing homelessness. It's an incredible experience getting to sit down with these women, eat with them, and hear their stories.

Two years ago, one of our middle schoolers noticed that the TV there was broken. Several of them tried to fix it but they were unable to get it working. Our youth then wondered if we might be able to get them a new TV. So we asked the staff at Sarah's Circle, who thought it was a wonderful idea, and we ended up bringing a new TV down to them a couple weeks later.

This past summer, we decided to ask them before we went – is there anything we can do to help? Do you have any other needs we can support? “Let us get back to you” they said, and a few days later sent me an email with a request that surprised me quite a bit – something I never would have thought of bringing – they wanted a karaoke machine. Ok, I said, I think we can manage that. And that's when they hit me with another request – when your group comes down, we'd love to have you host a karaoke night for the women.

I remember talking with Sean a week before we went on the trip – we were rather concerned that this situation might turn into a complete disaster. I knew I didn't want to get up there and sing, and wasn't sure how our middle schoolers would feel about singing in front of a group of strangers, or how the women at Sarah's Circle would feel about singing in front of this group of middle schoolers.

Nevertheless, we set off on the trip, and spent 2 great days working with other mission partners in the city before the third and final day at Sarah's Circle. We cooked and served tacos for dinner, and as we ate and talked with the women, a karaoke sign-up sheet started going around. A few of our youth began setting up the karaoke machine – and we discovered some of the women had even created decorations to liven up the event.

Once the setup was complete, it was time to begin. A couple of our 8<sup>th</sup> graders volunteered to serve as the MC's of the evening, so they took the mics and without a bit of hesitation they started cracking jokes and introducing the first song and singer. As they called the first name on the sign-up sheet, everyone turned to the

woman who was going to go first. Her song choice? Just Dance by Lady Gaga. This might have seemed like a good idea when she wrote it down, but at this point she was clearly very nervous and hesitant to go up. At that moment, one of the girls in our group offered to go up and sing with her. The woman's fear dissipated. She stood up, walked to the front, and the two of them took the mics as the music started to play. They started dancing. They sang. We all clapped along. The words of the chorus: "Just dance, gonna be okay. Just dance."

The evening continued like this for over an hour as these young 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders from Lake Forest and Lake Bluff sang and laughed and danced with these women who had gone through more than we could ever imagine. But in that moment none of that mattered. Whatever darkness in the world that any of us had experienced in our lives – in that moment there was light. There was resurrection. Jesus Christ was there with us.

I'd like to close by going back to this Gatorade bottle. There are other times when we feel like a full bottle that's overflowing with joy. There are times in our lives where we feel empty – where life and faith are hard. We walk on this journey in a world that's filled with darkness. We can have a hard time seeing any of God's light. But what this confirmation class did – you all took an individual bottle – your individual lives – and you joined together in community. You created a game on that retreat, but this year you've created a family. Whatever you might face in your lives, this community is here to support you. To be people to whom you can turn and ask "will you help me?" To be a place where you can laugh at episodes of The Office, or receive support when you're struggling. For Jesus Christ is present with us here in the faces of those around you. And no matter what darkness might overcome you, Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!