

## SEEING AND BELIEVING

[Tell Three Morons Joke]

Obviously I like jokes.

When I was a kid I used to like to take familiar sayings and turn them around.

“Time heals all wounds” became “time wounds all heels.”

“Necessity is the mother of invention” became “Mother is the inventor of necessity.” (My mom really liked that one.)

Ben Franklyn’s old saw became, “Early to bed, early to rise and your gal goes out with the rest of the guys.”

You can imagine what my less inspired efforts were like.

Anyway, it recently occurred to me that there are two sayings we’re all familiar with that seem to contradict each other.

On the one hand we say that “seeing is believing”-- meaning that we can trust the evidence of our senses.

Yet we also like to say that “the hand is quicker than the eye,” meaning that we can’t trust the evidence of our senses.

One asserts that if we observe something directly we can be sure it’s true.

The other asserts just the opposite: that our powers of observation can easily be fooled and are therefore not trustworthy.

Which one shall we believe?

If we see something with our own eyes, can we believe that it’s real, that it’s true?

Well, there are a lot of con artists out there who would certainly love to have you think so.

They’ll be glad to show you things you’d like to believe are real, but turn out to be smoke and mirrors.

That brings to mind another popular saying that it’s always good to remember: “If it sounds too good to be true—it probably is.”

Today’s Gospel lesson, which is John’s account of his and Peter’s discovery of the empty tomb, is all about seeing and believing.

In it we read the following (*John 20:3-8*). “He saw and believed.”

But what did he see?

What did he believe?

What he saw was Jesus’ clothing, folded up and lying where his body had been placed.

But Jesus’ body was gone; it had vanished without a trace from the tomb where it had been laid.

Now this tomb had been sealed and guarded by a squad of Roman soldiers.

You see, both the Jews and the Romans understood what was at stake here: the chief priests and the Pharisees had gone to Pontius Pilate and asked that “the tomb be made secure”—that is, sealed and placed under a heavy guard—precisely so that Jesus’ disciples would **not** be able to “...*come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead.*”

So based on what he saw—and what he DIDN’T see—John was forced to believe that something extraordinary had happened, that Jesus’ body had somehow vanished miraculously from the tomb where it had been laid.

*But what John and Peter didn't understand is as important as what they did: in the very next verse, we are told that they "...still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."*

In other words, they saw and believed that his body had disappeared, but they didn't understand yet that he had risen from the dead.

Mary Magdalene had exactly the same reaction: she thought someone must have carried Jesus' body away and placed it somewhere else.

It didn't even occur to her that he might have risen from the dead.

Many Easter sermons will be preached today on the empty tomb and other evidence that exists for Jesus' resurrection.

Since the Christian faith is based upon belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, preachers will cite historical, legal, medical and testimonial evidence which proves beyond any reasonable doubt *to an objective mind* that Jesus actually did die and rise from the dead.

They will argue that there is more evidentiary proof of Jesus' resurrection than there is for any other single event in history—and they will be right.

I know this is true, because I have preached those sermons myself.

The problem is, none of us have objective minds.

What we **do** have is opinions—and Oh how we love our opinions!

That's why our opinions are remarkably immune to evidence that weighs against them.

Outside of science (and scientists are not immune to this problem, by the way) one of the ways we trust the most to reach good decisions that are based on evidence is our jury system of administering justice.

Yet almost any trial lawyer will tell you that juries are swayed as much by emotion as they are by evidence.

A woman who sat on the jury that awarded half a million dollars to a woman who had spilled hot coffee in her lap was asked in an interview how she felt about the fact that the jury's verdict had become the butt of a lot of jokes.

She defended herself by saying that she just didn't like the attorneys who represented McDonald's because they seemed cold and uncaring.

Besides, she said, the woman had experienced a lot of pain and McDonald's could certainly afford it.

What these two things had to do with the facts of the case is anybody's guess, but she was content with her opinion and believed that the verdict that the jury reached was just.

Just this last week a member of Congress who was caught in a blatant lie responded by saying that if a person was morally right it didn't matter if he was factually wrong.

President John Adams famously said, facts are stubborn things, but when facts don't jibe with what we happen to believe, we're pretty good at finding ways to dispense with them.

The committed atheist will not be convinced by any amount of evidence that there is a God in heaven because he doesn't want to believe that there is a God in heaven.

Giving up a belief that one has held for a long time is almost like giving up part of himself.

If you doubt that we are this invested in our opinions, just consider the current political climate in our country. As we become more and more passionate about our politics, the country becomes more and more divided and angry.

One commentator described the current political climate as “tribalistic”: each side thinks they wear the white hats and the other side wears the black hats.

We get madder and madder and become convinced that we are doing God’s work and the other side is serving Satan.

There are probably rational discussions that could be held about political issues but we don’t want to have them.

We prefer to gobble up the facts that support our opinions and discount those that don’t because ***we love our opinions!***

“Mess with my opinion, and you’re messing with me!”

We see what we want to see and turn a blind eye to what we don’t want to see and yet manage to continue thinking of ourselves as objective.

The problem with “seeing is believing” is that as fallen creatures in a fallen world, we don’t see as clearly as we think we do.

On the contrary we see what we want to see so that we can believe what we want to believe.

And that means that we can’t completely trust our sight, let alone our opinions.

But if seeing is not believing, *believing does make it possible for us to see.*

Once faith is planted in our heart, our eyes and ears are opened and we can begin to see clearly.

Faith opens our minds to the words and wisdom of God and enables us to understand Who Jesus was, what he did and what that means for us.

When it comes to spiritual matters, it is faith and not evidence that enables us to see.

In military science there is a concept called the “fog of war” which descends on battles.

Battle plans may be drawn up—and they are important to be sure—but once the battle begins, the individual soldier sees very little of the overall picture.

Even generals, who are supposed to know what is going on, have only partial knowledge based on the reports and information they get from their subordinates.

Once a battle is engaged, the fog of war descends and men have to take action based upon the commands they receive—and sometimes upon the knowledge they alone have—rather than the overall picture.



There is a fog of war that can descend upon a Christian's life as well.

All our lives we are engaged in spiritual warfare and our human eyes and our human reason can't see the overall picture because we can't understand the ways of God.

His ways are as far above our ways as the heavens are above the earth.

God has only given us enough faith to follow him like a child is led through the dangerous traffic by clinging to the hand of his father.

Human eyes and human reason accompanied by human pride fight against faith all the days of our lives.

*"Faith—pish! Get real! Open your eyes and face reality!"*

Don't trust that voice, my friends. It comes from only one source, and that source is the ULTIMATE confidence man whose hand is **far** quicker than your eye.

This "source" has flooded the world with lies ever since the Garden of Eden and he still prowls around like a hungry lion, seeking souls to devour.

He wants only one thing, and that is to lure you your faith in Jesus Christ and rest your hopes for happiness and safety on what he has to offer.

That you leave God's word behind and believe what he has to say.

And what he has to say is always the same: *"Did God really say that?" "Everyone knows that nobody rises from the dead! Face up to it: life stinks and then you die."*

Such are the words of our enemy.

***But he is a liar!***

God's word is truth and Christ HAS risen from the dead to give you and me eternal life!

As Paul wrote, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us!" (Romans 8:18) For no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Cor. 2:9)*

In the midst of the spiritual war in which we are all engaged, the fog of war descends on us from time to time.

But we have something just as good as the overall picture: we have the Word of God.

Listen to that Word, and you will learn something far better than to believe based on what you see.

You will learn to see because of what you believe!

HE has risen! HE has risen, indeed!

Amen.