

**September 13, 2009**

**John 20:19-31**

**JOY, BELIEF, FELLOWSHIP**

**We must believe to see.**

**The** resurrection story is focused on getting out of the tomb. The gospel story of Jesus' ministry -- the preaching, the teaching, the healing -- is offered as a way to get all those listening to "come on" to Christ in faith.

After Jesus' crucifixion, his followers fled and scattered, hiding themselves from the authorities, cringing from any consequences of their discipleship.

The resurrection, the miracle of Joy, Belief and Fellowship, changes everything.

John's gospel insists that Jesus' followers "come out" -- stop their cowering, keep believing, crawl out of their tombs of fear and get to work.

In today's lesson, the risen Christ's words of commissioning are imposing. He hands over total responsibility for his earthly mission to his disciples - - "As God has sent me, so I send you" (v.21).

Nothing less than a full continuation of Christ's love and commitment is ordered, a tall order for fewer than a dozen terrified students closeted in a locked room.

Is Franklin Church today hunkered down for safety in some quiet corner of culture? It's not hard to feel that a "bunker mentality" might be appropriate.

In every city you can find several big, beautiful, cathedral-style churches that harbor only a handful of worshipers each Sunday -- then close up tight the rest of the week.

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In suburban neighborhoods, far more children are on sports teams than in Sunday school. Popular culture likes to portray people of faith as gutless, gullible Bible-thumpers, or as sleazy, two-faced con artists.

At best, it seems that many Christian Churches have developed a kind of harmless, out-of-touch image. Many just visit only once or twice a year on special occasions.

At worst, the Christian Church is blamed for adding to the boiling cauldron of hatreds and prejudices that fuel so many human conflicts.

So what are we doing about these false images, these church stereotypes, these lies?

Far too often do we take the disciples' earliest post-resurrection stance -- hiding out, while waiting for the hostile hordes to come and break down our doors.

Like the disciples we want a sign, a miraculous visitation all our own, before we dare to venture back out into the mainstream of life.

Where is the JOY?

What would happen if we suddenly took the risen Christ seriously when he proclaimed before Doubting Thomas and the other disciples: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe"?

We have become steeped in the dictum of old, objective scientific methods that preach "seeing believes." Franklin Church was founded 169 years ago on a complete reversal of that hypothesis.

First you believe, and then you see. Believing is seeing. Believing provides the vision, the insight, and the perception necessary to change things, to make things happen.

Physicist Fred Alan Wolf, who wrote the book "Taking the Quantum Leap and Parallel Universes", says that quantum physics boils down to this: "The universe does not exist independent of the thoughts of the observer."

Stripped of the arrogant metaphysical claims in such a statement, the fundamental principle of quantum physics is in layman's language: "You will see it when you believe it."

Faith (BELIEF) in Jesus Christ changes the way we believe, which changes the way we see. Weren't the blind top candidates for Jesus' healing?

Ever hear the story about the two salesmen who were sent by a shoe manufacturer to a remote country to sell shoes?

One salesman wrote back: "I have terrible news. This is a God-forsaken country. Nobody here wears shoes. I'm coming home."

The other salesman wrote: "This is a wonderful country. I am so grateful you sent me to this territory. Nobody here wears shoes. Send me 5,000 pairs."

It is the ability to see that releases power in our lives. The wrong perspective is imprisonment; the right perspective is empowerment.

In fact, neurologists now tell us that one has to learn to see. Just because we have eyes that work doesn't mean we can see what is there.

Adults who have been blind since childhood, like one man named Virgil from Oklahoma regained his sight after 45 years of blindness, could not immediately "see" what his vision registered because he didn't have the experience or meaning necessary to interpret his new sight.

The New Yorker, 10 May 1993, pages 59-73).

People can't make sense of what they are seeing in this new and alien world.

All the nerves and impulses are there, but they are mentally blind. Their habits, their behaviors are still those of their unsighted life; they have "unstable judgment of space and distance."

In fact, a month after surgery, a seeing Virgil "felt more disabled than he had felt when he was blind, and he had lost the confidence, the ease of moving, that he had possessed then".

The physical and emotional impact of the gift of sight can be "almost shocking, explosive". The blessing of this new sense can quickly become a curse.

One reaction of the body to overload and over stimulation is a shutdown, complete blockage of the new visual world and return to the tactile world.

Lots of patients "behave blind" and "refuse to see" even after their sight is restored.

Marius von Senden, reviewing every published case over a 300-year period in his classic book *Space and Sight* (1932).

He concluded that every newly sighted adult sooner or later comes to a "motivation crisis" -- and not every patient gets through it.

There are plenty of people out there who are "seeing but not seeing."

Jesus could work with people who had to see first in order to believe. That is what his resurrection appearances are all about.

But for those who believe without seeing, Jesus offers something special -- blessing.

When Thomas finally comes to belief after viewing the risen Christ face-to-face, Jesus acknowledges his faith, but offers no special blessing.

It is to future believers, to those who will only hear about Jesus, yet who believe and in turn pass the gospel on to others, that Jesus bestows his special blessing.

We are those disciples -- at least the most recent generation of them. Our church is made up of all those who have believed without seeing.

We are the recipients of Jesus' special blessing. We have also received the breath of the Holy Spirit to empower us as we go into the world. So what's stopping us? What's keeping us hidden away?

(Maybe it's FELLOWSHIP)

Part of the problem is that we have let what we believe become separated from the way we act. But what if we let Jesus' dictum "first you believe, then you see" spill over into all our life -- not just "the religious part?"

If we believe that God is in the midst of a great work today, that the best days of Franklin Church are in the future, not the past -- then we can begin to see it.

Of course, between believing and seeing is a lot of hard work. Believing isn't the same thing as wishing. Believing takes grit and guts, blood and sweat.

It also requires enthusiasm, energy and zeal. To get from believing to seeing takes two kinds of leaders, two kinds of action -- and they are the same two types that today's gospel highlights.

First, there are the indigenous Christians -- those in our midst who really do "get it," who see the vision.

Indigenous Christians believe and communicate that the church today can be as vital a body of the risen Lord as it ever has been. These are the faithful who call others to "come on."

The author of a respected equestrian study guide tells what is required to become adept at jumping horses over tall fence barriers.

In describing how the rider overcomes his own hesitation, the writer states, "Take your heart and throw it over the fence and then jump after it."

Second, there are the indignant Christians -- those who scold the church and the culture for their doubting discipleship and fearful fellowship.

While indigenous believers enthusiastically call others to "come on" to Christ, indignant Christians challenge the church with a "come out" emphasis.

Today more than ever, we need indignant believers to stand up in the midst of our congregation and silence the nay-saying, deep-sighing, gloom-and-doom attitudes that pervade too many churches.

What happens when the spirit of an indigenous and indignant faith takes hold; when "come on" and "come out" become our watch-words; when believing is seeing?

- Churches with shrinking attendance don't move into smaller, "more manageable" quarters. They redesign their space to meet the diverse needs of a 21st century Christian community.

- Churches with unmet pledges don't slash their budgets. They make the needs known to the whole community and expect surprising, even supernatural results.

- Churches that find their urban locations have become "war zones" don't immediately cry "retreat" and head for the suburbs.

They send out scouts with provisions to see what the opposing forces are doing and what the church can offer as an alternative.

- Churches with that "silver-haired" look don't mourn the loss of their youth.

They start a special 65 and over ministry that takes full advantage of the gifts of wisdom, courage, experience and time of these aged, sage members of our community.

- Churches that can no longer communicate to all their members and their neighbors in one language don't fracture into separate congregations.

They raise up and train indigenous leaders from their midst who can speak the variety of languages the faithful utter.

Let me tell you a story about a monk who had long planned to go to Jerusalem to see the Holy Sepulcher.

He finally began with the money he had saved over 40 years.

Soon after he left the monastery, he passed a field where a pale, emaciated man was digging roots out of the ground, and he said to the monk, "Good morning, Father. Where are you going?"

The monk replied, "I am going to Jerusalem to see the Holy Sepulcher, where Christ was buried, and I am going to march around it three times and pray."

The man in the field said, "That trip will cost much money." "Yes," said the monk, "all my life's savings."

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Then the man suggested, "Father, why not march around me three times and give me the money so that my wife and children might have food." And the monk did.

The monk never saw where Christ was buried. But he saw where Christ was alive and living -- in other people!

Let us be a dynamite Church where JOY, BELIEF and FELLOWSHIP abound.

Amen!