

EASTER 2B - April 8, 2018
I'll See It When I Believe It
(John 20:19-31)

Although I'm a little fuzzy on the details, it was around 40 years ago, I'm thinking, during Bill Bradley's first U.S. Senate campaign. For those of you who don't remember, Bill Bradley was a former New York Knicks basketball star, and a member of their 1970 and 1973 NBA championship teams. He then went into politics, winning and serving three terms down in Washington as a senator from New Jersey. Later, he even challenged Al Gore for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2000. However, after a dismal showing in the primaries, and dropping *out* of that race, he then retired from politics into private life.

But, as I say, 40 years ago he was making a big splash by running for the Senate and so, naturally, he was campaigning all over the state. Now while I don't remember the exact circumstances of where I was or what I was doing at the time, what I *do* remember is that my brother Dave came home one evening and said that he had met Bradley down on the boardwalk in Seaside Park. "I don't believe it," I said. "No way."

"Yes way!" he said. "All of a sudden he was there on the boardwalk just walking along shaking hands," Dave added.

"Prove it," I said.

Ah... Those two little words: *Prove it*. We've all heard and even used those words ourselves, haven't we? The position is pretty much this; "Somehow prove it to me, and *then* I'll believe." Or as we sometimes like to say, "I'll believe it when I see it." In other words, provide some evidence, or authentication, and maybe *then* (and *only* then) I'll accept what you're telling me as being true.

But sometimes providing that kind of irrefutable proof or authentication is extremely difficult, if not impossible...

There is an urban legend, that some insist is nevertheless true, that former Saturday Night Live cast member turned movie star, Bill Murray, likes to sneak up behind unsuspecting people in New York City – or wherever – cover their eyes with his hands, and then say “Guess who?” And then when they turn around and see that it’s Bill Murray, he sort of taunts them with the words, “No one will ever believe you!”

Now today, of course, people can probably pull out their cell phones and theoretically snap a picture of Murray before he walks away and escapes... If they’re quick enough, that is.

But if this urban legend is actually true, what about all those people he snuck up behind *before* the advent of cell phones? They literally were out of luck, weren’t they? No one would have ever believed them. When their friends and family members said things like, “Prove it,” or “I’ll believe it when I see it,” they really didn’t have any good options to provide the necessary evidence, did they?

However, in my brother’s case, he *had* the necessary evidence. You see, forty years ago, when I challenged him to prove it, he immediately pulled out Bill Bradley’s “autograph” that he had gotten earlier that day. An autograph he subsequently framed and today hangs on a wall in his house. In fact, here it is...

(Pull out the autograph and show it to the congregation.)

Moreover, his claim was then even *further* bolstered by a clip on the 11:00 o’clock news that evening actually *showing* Bradley engaging the people on the boardwalk down in Seaside Park.

But, again, what happens in those situations where there *is* no way to *prove* or authenticate such a claim?

...Just such a situation is described for us in today's gospel reading, isn't it? On Easter evening, only a few short hours after the discovery of the empty tomb, and amidst growing reports of a seemingly outrageous claim that Jesus had somehow been raised from the dead, Jesus actually came and stood among his disciples, we're told. They had gathered behind locked doors, in all likelihood, because they feared that the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities who would have naturally *assumed* that it was actually Jesus' *followers* who had simply stolen the body and now were going around spreading this false claim of a resurrection.

After greeting them with the words, "Peace be with you," Jesus then proceeded to show them his hands, that had been nailed to the cross, and then his side, that had been pierced by the Roman soldier's spear in order to confirm that he was, in fact, actually dead. And it was only at this point, says John, that "...the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." In other words, the irrefutable evidence needed to prove such an outrageous claim was now standing right there in front of them. No doubt about it.

Reminds me of a cartoon. Two Roman soldiers are guarding Jesus' tomb on that first Easter morning. Each of them is holding a mug of tea in his hand, and the sun is just rising above the horizon. And one of the soldiers says to the other, "Cheer up, it's Sunday morning. As I see it, we only have one more day of guarding this tomb. By Monday, the whole thing will have blown over."

But it didn't, did it? In fact, already by Easter *evening*, let alone Monday morning, by Easter evening the cat was out of the bag, so to speak. The outrageous claim of the resurrection was no longer outrageous. The unsubstantiated reports of Jesus walking out of the tomb alive were now substantiated by his literal appearance in their midst. This unprecedented account of someone conquering death was breaking all the old assumptions of what was indeed possible, and was becoming the *precedent* of a brand new reality.

There was just one small problem, though, wasn't there? One of the twelve disciples, the one named "Thomas," was not with them that first Easter evening. And so, when the other disciples later told him, "We have seen the Lord," he, of course, did not believe them. Instead, 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."

"Unless I *see*... I will not *believe*." Or again, as we sometimes say, "I'll believe it when I see it."

Now Thomas, whose name – interestingly enough – means "the Twin," we're told, gets something of a bad rap for being a so-called "doubter." When, in reality, we *all* have a difficult time believing in things that we haven't seen with our own two eyes. Katharine Hinman, the associate pastor of Decatur First Methodist Church down in Decatur, Georgia, once described herself this way: "I'm a scientist by training. Forming hypotheses, looking for evidence, questioning, testing, re-testing – that's my bread and butter. It's in my DNA."

Of course, the vast majority of us are *not* trained scientists, however, as she is. But almost all of us have been trained in the scientific *method* somewhere along the line in our educational experiences. So we can fully understand and appreciate where she's coming from. Because we too form hypotheses, look for evidence, then test, re-test, and test those suppositions yet again. We *too* want to have clear evidence and empirical proof that something is *so*, or we're not inclined to believe it. Right?

And Thomas (who was called the Twin) was no different. "I'll believe it when I see it," he said.

But it's not so easy to believe in something in the absence of proof, is it? Again, we typically want to see things with our own two eyes. We want absolute certainty, if and whenever we can get it.

I heard a story about a 90-year-old grandfather who was complaining to his grandson about getting old. He said, “The worst part is the diapers! Now, I don’t mind wearin’ ‘em,” he said, “it’s just the name I hate. *Depends!* If I have to wear a diaper, I don’t want there to be any ‘*depends*’ about it. I want *for sures*’!

We all do, don’t we? In life, even in the life of faith, we don’t want there to be any “depends.” We want “for sures.”

In an odd footnote from history; in 1887, or twenty-two years after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, there were so many rumors circulating about his body not actually being in his grave, that they went ahead and dug up his coffin and opened it. Naturally, the body was still there.

But, believe it or not, the rumors persisted, however. So fourteen years later, they did it *again*. And once again, the witnesses who were present testified that Lincoln was *still* in the grave.

So here’s the thing. I’m guessing that the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities must have done the same exact thing in Jesus’ case as well. Don’t you agree? They clearly would have checked and re-checked that tomb. And then checked it yet again, just for good measure. They would have pursued every theory and hypothesis put forth as possible explanations, and followed up on every lead, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant.

In fact, that’s precisely why the disciples were so *frightened* that first Easter evening! They were afraid that they would be *blamed* for the empty tomb and the missing body.

So it was a scary time for Jesus’ followers. And, yet, they were just as baffled by what had happened as anyone. Until Easter evening, that is.

And so, in *that* light, Thomas' response is not all that unusual or difficult for us to comprehend or accept. This surprising news of a risen Jesus didn't make sense to *anyone*, including and especially Thomas.

And just like I did 40 years ago, in response to my brother's claim that he had seen Bill Bradley on the Seaside Park boardwalk, if *we* were in Thomas' shoes, I'm guessing that we would have responded just as *he* did. saying, "Prove it. I'll believe it when I see it."

...However, our gospel reading doesn't quite end there, does it? In the second half of our reading, it picks up the story exactly one week later. The disciples were once again gathered in that very same house. But *this time* Thomas was with them.

And once again, Jesus came and stood among them, saying "Peace be with you." But this time, Jesus immediately turned to Thomas and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out *your* hand and put it in my side."

And then Jesus said this: "Do not doubt, but believe." And in that moment Thomas *did* believe. And, therefore, in that precise moment he could also *see*. Yes, it's true that he had literally just observed the risen Jesus. But notice here that it's not until Jesus says, "Do not doubt, but believe" that Thomas' eyes are finally opened... and he can *truly* see. "My Lord and my God!" he exclaims.

In response, Jesus says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe."

In other words, in sharp contrast to our typical response and orientation, "I'll believe it when I see it," what Jesus is advocating for here is the exact *opposite*. That seeing is a *consequence*, or result, of believing; not the other way around.

You see, my sermon theme this morning is not a typo. For the Christian, it's more accurate to say, "I'll *see it*... when I *believe it*." Because in the life of faith, believing always comes first...

Martin Luther King, Jr. once put it this way: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." And it was Martin Luther himself, the great reformer, who suggested: "Faith is permitting ourselves to be seized by things we *do not* see." And finally, to my point, it was St. Augustine who famously said, "Faith is to *believe* what you do not see... The reward of this faith," he said, "is to *see* what you believe."

In our own day, Peter Marty has written, "If you are looking for empirical claims on which to ground your Christian life, you will always come up short. Always. Thomas *is* your twin brother (remember that's what his name means) if visible proof is your requirement for a trusting faith. Faith is guaranteed to collapse and become a shaky venture," writes Marty, "if it demands proof for every doubt..."

But again, believing without first seeing remains, for most of us, a huge hurdle. Gordon Curley tells the story of a bishop over in Great Britain whose car once ran out of gas. His wife, who was driving along with him that day, remembered seeing a gas station about half a mile back down the road. So he got out of their car and started looking in the trunk for some sort of container, but all he could find was a "port-a-potty": that is, the portable toilet they used whenever they were watching their grandchildren. And because it was all he could find, it would have to do.

So he trudged back to the gas station, filled up the portable toilet with gasoline, and then – very carefully – carried it back to his car where he started to *carefully* pour the contents into his empty gas tank.

Driving by just then was a former parishioner who now belonged to a new, independent church. Recognizing his former vicar, and seeing that

he was in need, the man immediately pulled over and stopped his car in order to offer some help. As he approached, however, he observed the bishop pouring the contents of that portable toilet into his car's gas tank.

The man gasped. After a few speechless moments, he finally blurted out, "If I'd known that they had faith like *this* in the Church of England, I never would have left!"

...Over twenty-five years ago, at the height of Operation Desert Storm, a woman named Ruth Dillow received a very sad message from the Pentagon. She was told that her son, Clayton, had stepped on a land mine in Kuwait and was killed. Later, Ruth wrote these words, "I can't begin to describe my grief and shock. It was almost more than I could bear. For three days I just wept. I expressed anger and loss. For three days people tried to comfort me, but nothing worked... The loss was simply too great."

But three days after she had received that tragic message, the phone rang. The voice on the other end said, "Mom? It's me, Clayton. I'm alive."

Ruth said, "I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice and realized he really *was* alive. The message was all a mistake." She said, "I laughed, I cried, I felt like turning cartwheels because my son, who I thought was dead, was actually alive!"

Nearly two *thousand* years ago, the disciples of a man named Jesus witnessed his death on a cross. Just like Ruth Dillow, they couldn't even *begin* to describe their grief and shock. It was almost too much for *them* to bear as well. For three days, they too expressed anger and loss. For three days, nothing and no *one* could comfort them either. The loss was simply too great.

But then on the evening of that third day, a day in which wild rumors about an empty tomb and a resurrected Jesus were circulating

throughout the city, Jesus came and stood among them. Now Thomas was not with them. So, a week later, with Thomas this time present, Jesus returned and stood among them again.

And while this morning's reading does not describe it, I can only imagine that – on both occasions – the disciples laughed and cried and felt like turning cartwheels. Because their Lord, who they thought was dead, who they *saw* die on the cross with their own two eyes, was alive!

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, we're told, which are *not* written in this book; the Gospel of John. But these *were* written so that you and I might come to believe that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God, and that *through* believing we might have life in his name.

Of course, we weren't there to witness these events ourselves. Therefore, if seeing is believing, then we're completely out of luck, aren't we? But if faith, in fact, *precedes* knowledge or proof, then we can see what we first believed.

For us, then, this one fact is always true when it comes to faith in the risen Jesus, and in the good news of Easter. We will *see it...* when we *believe it*.

Amen.