

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin was not with them when Jesus came.²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe."²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Laura was telling me about the fellow who late one night was pacing around on the sidewalk, under a street lamp, with his face turned toward the ground. When asked what he was doing, he said, "looking for my car keys." "How did you lose them here?" she asked. "I didn't," he said. "I lost them over there (pointing) but the light's better over here."

Looking for things can be frustrating. Not being able to find what we need can be annoying. Not being able to see what we are looking at can be extremely aggravating.

The old expression is "seeing is believing." Its origin may go all the way back to today's Gospel lesson, where Thomas said that his belief would require seeing, and perhaps touching. (He said he needed both, but the actual encounter doesn't tell us for sure if Thomas touched Jesus, or if Jesus just offered him the opportunity, but the seeing was enough for him. And, in a strange play on words, in verse 27, Jesus invites Thomas to "put your finger here" so that he could "see.")

We are certain of this: Thomas was unwilling to merely accept the accounts of his friends; he wanted a first hand encounter with Jesus in order to believe that his rabbi and best friend were indeed risen from the dead.

Although Thomas has gotten a bad rap, I'm here to tell you that we should hope that we are all like Thomas.

Many people are afraid to admit their doubts. Many people are afraid to be honest enough to admit when they are angry with God, or feel that God has treated them unfairly.

Somewhere along the line, someone has taught them that this means they lack faith (or, worse yet, has taught them that they will get in trouble with God if they admit to these feelings.)

Whoever taught them this, unfortunately never read the Psalms nor the book of Job and likewise did not realize how these REAL FEELINGS are the path by which God's children have ended up getting closer to God.

One of the greatest preachers of the Gospel, fourth century preacher John Chrysostom warns that there are two dangers to our faith: [1] a willingness to believe anything, and [2] a demand for absolute certainty.

THOMAS gives us a role model, as explained in today's anthem:

**We all are Thomas: we have to see
 We have to see with our own eyes
 Before we risk believing
 Or open to receive His wondrous gift
 We have to see.
 We all are Thomas: we have to touch
 We have to touch with our own hands
 The wounds that once were bleeding
 The hands that prayed that we would
 All be one.
 And yet He comes to us,
 Holds out His Hands to us;
 And he invites us: touch and see.
 He knows it's not easy to believe.
 Yet it is when we touch
 The broken Body of our Lord
 That we see Him for Who He truly is
 We all are Thomas.
 We all are Thomas.**

(Anthem: "We All Are Thomas," words by Gloria Gaither, from cantata, "Then Came the Morning" Gaither Music Company, © 1985)

There are far too many people today who are satisfied MERELY to come to know ABOUT Jesus, without actually KNOWING Jesus.

BUT when we do see and believe – and here's the real kicker – it changes HOW WE SEE.

There are some people who only KNOW ABOUT JESUS from their grandparents, parents, Sunday School class, etc., but don't have that personal relationship with Jesus. That turns Jesus into

- an object lesson,
- often a morality code,
- rarely any basis for worth except in the form of some memorized doctrine about salvation that is based on just future worth,
- and quite frequently a set of rules and obligations.

If THIS is our relationship with Jesus (a relationship that is actually devoid of personal relationship, but nothing more than we would have with some political leader that we've never met) then it certainly changes HOW WE SEE THINGS.

But, once we SEE and BELIEVE and HAVE A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP, as did Thomas, then it changes radically the way we see life.

The two little picture inserts in the bulletin today illustrate, to a limited degree.

Is it a young lady or is it an old woman? If you can't see both, turn to the person next to you and let them show you the other one that you are missing.

What is the man, with the outstretched arm doing? Climbing a wall? Turn your bulletin upside down and look again. He's only crawling along his driveway.

What we see often depends on what we are looking for.

Jesus satisfied Thomas' "Seeing is Believing" test and allowed Thomas to enter into relationship with the resurrected Jesus. That changed everything for Thomas.

And we need to quit misreading what Jesus said to Thomas. Jesus did NOT say ... and please look at verse 29 to make sure that you read exactly what is said -- Jesus did NOT say "MORE blessed are those who believe who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Blessed was Thomas who saw and then believed, and blessed are we who did not physically see the risen Lord, and believe. We are all blessed, ***if we have a faith that is based on a personal relationship with the risen Jesus.***

And then it changes our vision, changes how we see things; how we see people.

- For example, as today's Gospel verse 23 hints: when we see people we see them like ourselves: sinners but forgiven. We see them with Jesus forgiving their sins as well as our own. We don't not see them with their sins still clinging onto them. (Of course, that just follows what we say when we pray as Jesus taught: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.)
- As Easter people, who have a personal relationship with Jesus we see people for their potential, not their mistakes. Our vision sees them as Jesus saw people. "Neither do I condemn you woman; go and sin no more." (John 8:11.)
- As Easter people, who have a personal relationship with Jesus, we see that Jesus always arrives first, and we do not ever need to see ourselves as alone in any situation.
- As Easter people, who have a personal relationship with Jesus, we see that others are also ***made in the very image of God***, and also are ***beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold***.

One of the greatest tools that Jesus used was His blessed mirror. It isn't specifically mentioned in the Gospels, but even a casual reading of the Gospels reveals how over and over, He would reach into the inside pocket of his robe and pull out this Blessed Mirror, that was unlike any other of its time.

This mirror showed people both the Image of God in which they were indeed lovingly made. And it showed them their potential.

The first image that appears is that of a "beloved child of God, precious and beautiful to behold." Secondly, they will be able to see a Crown of Glory over their heads – an image that they can spend the rest of their lives growing up until they fit into that Crown. They can do so, by God's Grace and because someone showed them what it looks like.

Because Jesus has shown us this image of ourself, we, too, are able to show others the same thing. Our having this vision is the greatest gift we can give to people; and it's all because we are Easter people who sees things like Jesus does.

As we grow in our relationship with Jesus, not merely in knowledge about Him, we have our vision altered, just like Thomas did. We all are Thomas.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.