

Texts: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16, 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Seeing is believing. In many ways that is the theme of the gospel of John.

So much in John's gospel has to do with seeing – with walking in the light as opposed to walking in darkness, and to seeing rightly who Jesus is and what it is that he is doing. Jesus' first words in the gospel of John are an invitation to "Come and see." And that invitation continues through the entire book.

John's story of the resurrection is full of what people saw: Mary Magdalene came to the tomb last Sunday and *saw* that the stone had been removed. Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb and *saw* the linen wrappings lying there; then they went in and "*saw* and believed." Mary Magdalene *saw* two angels in white, and then she *saw* Jesus standing there (but didn't recognize him) and he asked her, "Whom are you looking for?" After she mistook him for the gardener, he called her by name and she *saw* him and recognized him. Then she went and told the disciples, "I have *seen* the Lord."

Now, in the evening of the same day, the disciples *see* Jesus, in his body, wounds and all. But Thomas, who arrives afterward and misses everything, very *reasonably* says he won't believe until he *sees* for himself the mark of the nails on Jesus' hands.

For all these centuries and millennia, Thomas has gotten a bad rap from the church. He has been called a doubter, simply because wasn't in the room on that first night. He simply wants the same opportunity that all the other disciples had – to *see* Jesus for himself. For some reason, we focus on that, and not on his words a week later when he finally does see Jesus standing in

front of him: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas is the one who confesses who Jesus really is. He is the one who understands that Jesus is really risen. He is the one who understands that God’s presence is to be found in Jesus – to be seen as well as touched.

Where does that leave the rest of us? Because for all these centuries and millennia, most followers of Jesus have been like Thomas. We weren’t there at the tomb. We weren’t there in the house later on that evening. Most followers of Jesus have had to rely on what they heard rather than what they saw. The story was passed down, from that first night onward. Eventually it was written down, but most people still could not read so they needed to hear it told. The good news is that Jesus calls the rest of us blessed. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

We are part of that great story telling tradition. The story of creation, spoken into being by God’s word. The story of God’s people, chosen, called and sent to a land of promise. The story of individual people who heard God’s voice and walked in God’s direction. The story of Jesus himself, the story we tell in our creeds and at Wednesday School and here on Sunday mornings. The story of Jesus’ birth, death, resurrection and ascension.

Two thousand years later, in this little town of Chadron, we who follow our risen Lord gather on this first day of the week to proclaim who he is and what he is doing in our lives and in our community. This community of faith has its own story to tell – of God at work in the lives of the saints who founded this church, who gathered first at the Seventh-Day Adventist building and not long after, broke ground here on the corner of 8th and Ann Streets. Some of the story can be seen downstairs on the walls in the photos of confirmation classes through the decades. Some of the story is collected in commemorative

books that were written for important anniversaries. There are names on plaques and memorials all around this building. But I want to caution you – it's often easy to look backward and think that the best of our story is behind us. And that is simply not true. God is working in and through this community in ways that can be seen and in ways that cannot be seen.

This morning, Joe and Julie and Lillian are going to formally join our community of faith by affirming their baptisms. They were invited to “come and see” and now they are going to become part of the story of this congregation. The rest of you will be their witnesses. What is a witness? A witness is a person who sees something happening and then goes and tells the story.

For those of you who have been here for a while, I ask: how will you welcome this new family into the story of this church? How will you tell them about the gifts that we have to offer to them? How will you accept the gifts that they bring here? Because with each new family that comes into our doors, there is a new story to be added. There is a new story to be told.

There is one more thing that the risen Jesus did that first night with his disciples. He breathed on them; he gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit and he offered them God's own peace. He blew the breath of the Spirit in their faces – the same spirit that hovered over the waters of the deep at creation. He offered God's peace to them with the same voice that called worlds into being. God's presence is physical. It's the breath you inhale and exhale. It's God filling your lungs.

Jesus would never again be with his disciples as he had been. They will no longer see him. They will no longer hear his voice. But he will be with them in an entirely new way. His life, his resurrection, will infuse their lives.

Just as his life, his resurrection, infuses your life. When the risen Jesus says “Peace be with you,” he gives to his disciples the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. The peace of God is not the same as the absence of conflict. The peace of God brings abundance and steadfast love. The peace of God does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen. The peace of God expresses the blessing and hope that begins now and extends into the life to come.

The disciples on that first night saw the risen Jesus. They heard him speak and they felt his breath. A week later, Thomas got his chance, to see his Lord and God and make his confession. For all these centuries and millennia, faithful people have invited others to come and see. They have told the story. They have offered God’s peace. Now it is your turn.

You are a believer today because the disciples took Mary Magdalene at her word that first day. She told them she had seen the Lord. Then the risen Jesus came into their midst, too. They went out and told the story – that Jesus was not dead, but alive. That God’s love is more powerful even than death.

Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you. Jesus, God’s Word-made-flesh, sends us out to tell God’s story in in concrete deeds. Every act of compassion. Every act of generosity. Every act of forgiveness. Every act of hospitality. Every act of peace-making. Every act of non-violence. Every act to restore a broken relationship.

Believing is seeing. Seeing resurrection all around you. Telling the story and knowing that you are a part of it. Extending God’s peace everywhere you go, to everyone you meet. Blessed are you who see and who believe.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed, alleluia.