

DON'T LIVE! YOU MAY DIE!

Sermon, April 19, 2020

The Sunday After Easter

Texts: Psalm 16, John 20:19-31, I Peter 1:3-9

"Blessed are those who believe who have not seen," says Jesus to Thomas. We all know the old saying, "Seeing is believing." Well, the Bible often reverses that; biblically, it is more often the case that believing is seeing. What we believe often determines how and/or what we really see. It is through the eyes of faith that we *really* begin to see. It is in believing we have hope in that which is unseen.

Jerry Kramer was an all-pro offensive guard of a team that dominated the National Football league in the sixties ... the invincible Green Bay Packers, under Vince Lombardi. Jerry Kramer also authored some best-selling books about his football experiences, including Instant Replay (1967), which was something of a day-to-day diary of the Packers that season, and in retirement he wrote Distant Replay (1985), the title being an obvious pun on the original book. I read Instant Replay at least three times while in high school; as a young football player, I was riveted and inspired by Kramer's page-turning diary of the 1967 championship season of the Packers. I picked up a copy of Distant Replay ten or so years ago; in one poignant passage in, Kramer reflects on his sense of mortality, even though he was a relatively young man of forty-nine at the time:

I think a lot about death these days, which is funny, because I've never been healthier. I've had only one serious illness in the past ten years. I haven't broken a bone, not even a finger, since I stopped playing football sixteen years ago. My weight is not bad, about 240, twenty pounds less than when I stopped playing, and most of the time I feel awfully good. And yet now, more than ever, I sense that I am mortal. A year ago, I lost my father to cancer, and I don't think I'll ever get over his death. In some ways, I think it was more difficult for the family than it was for him. Dad was a very religious man and he was ready to go. He had his faith and he said he was locked in the arms of the Lord. Sometimes I wish I had that kind of faith. But I don't. I just have questions."¹

His father's death was harder on the family than it was on the father, even though the father was the one dying. Why did Dad handle it so well? Because, Kramer wrote, Dad believed. Because he *"... was a very religious man and he was ready to go. He had his faith and he said he was locked in the arms of the Lord."* This was a faith Jerry Kramer apparently envied, but did not share. His Dad was confident, calm, serene, *blessed* ... because his Dad believed.

Jesus says to Thomas in today's passage, *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."* Yes, Jerry Kramer, blessed are the believers, like your Dad. Blessed are the people who come to grips with their doubts in an honest and forthright way and make a commitment of their will to trust and believe in God while they live, even though they haven't seen Him (*which, by the way, includes just about all of you here or watching online this morning! None of us have actually ever seen Jesus, yet you are here because of your belief*). There really is blessing in being a believer! Now, what I'm about to say comes from my admittedly subjective experience, and I readily acknowledge there are exceptions to every rule, but generally speaking I've found people of faith are usually happier, calmer, kinder, more civil, tolerant, loving, and patient than the faithless. I've also observed people of faith tend to be more serene and accepting when it comes to handling the blows, setbacks and disruptions that inevitably come in every person's life; they do not let the fear of hardship and death keep them from living! There really is power in believing, more power than the unbeliever and/or the cynic can ever know! And in the end, there is tremendous blessing in knowing the end is *not* the end ... like Jerry Kramer's father, we can all take great comfort in knowing *"we are locked in the arms of the Lord."*

"Thomas, called Didymus," the Gospel text reads. Thomas is the Aramaic word for twin, and Didymus is the Greek word for twin. So, a literal translation would be, "Twin, called Twin." Some historians say Thomas wasn't even a real name at that era, just a nick-name at the time which has now evolved today into an actual (*and quite common*) name. It would seem, then, that this disciple must have had a sibling. I find it interesting we don't know anything about the other twin. Was it a twin brother? A twin sister? An identical twin? We don't know. None of the Gospels tell us anything of a sibling. In early church history the Gnostic sect actually thought Thomas was *Jesus'* twin brother ... which would certainly change our nativity scenes to have two babies in the manger! One early church tradition held that he was called "the Twin" because he had a remarkable physical resemblance to Jesus; so, the other disciples called him "the Twin" because he looked like Jesus. Again, we don't know. We DO know Thomas has been better known throughout church history, somewhat derisively, as the cynical Doubting Thomas (*or as the Patron Saint of Those Who Are The Last To Know*). However, as I've mentioned when we've looked at this passage before, I think Thomas is worthy of our imitation, not our derision. If anything, maybe we should try to be Thomas' unnamed twin; we should strive to resemble this tenacious disciple ... for genuine doubt, properly exercised, can be a good thing.

¹ Jerry Kramer with Dick Schaap, Distant Replay, (New York: G.P.Putnams Sons, 1985), p. 16

*(The following was edited out due to time constraints.) There is a disingenuous doubt that really doesn't want answers; it just likes creating and asking endless questions. This is a doubt that at times won't even acknowledge what it knows to be true ... because to do so may have implications for the way one lives his/her life. This disingenuous doubt is really just unbelief in a different guise; it is a refusal to believe. One person summed it up this way: "Doubt is **can't** believe; unbelief is **won't** believe. Doubt is honesty; unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light; unbelief is quite content with darkness." The good type of doubt wants answers, it wants clarification! Genuine doubt can be a vehicle that will drive us to eventually discover and encounter truth; in fact, it can and will eventually take us to the One Who is the Truth.*

In today's Gospel reading it was the night of that first Easter Sunday. The rest of the disciples were hiding behind a locked door. They had heard Jesus was alive, but they didn't know what to make of that. The text tells us they are huddled together behind this locked door *"for fear of the Jews."* Well, all the disciples are Jewish, so that means they are in fear of their own people. Yes, they feared their own people ... you might say they were practicing social distancing, huddled in a locked room, afraid to go out. Suddenly, the risen Jesus appears in their midst. *(And allow me to make the observation that of course. The risen Jesus is often present where two or three disciples are gathered together in His name, especially on Sunday ... even if it's online!)* Seeing Jesus in their midst, their doubts dissipate, they are overjoyed, delighted; they are energized and emboldened by Jesus' living presence, they are motivated by His word, empowered by His spirit. *(And allow me to make the observation that of course, that's what often happens when the living Jesus visits His disciples gathered together in His name on Sunday!)* Jesus appeared to the disciples in this closed room, showed them His hands and side, they were overjoyed to see him, but as noted in verse 24, *"Thomas, called Didymus, one of the twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came."* I can imagine the disciples saying, *"That Thomas ... boy, Did-he-miss it this time!"* We don't know where Thomas was, any more than we know where approximately 50% of the church's members are who are not here on a typical Sunday after Easter when we are not under quarantine! All we know is Thomas was absent. And he missed out; he missed something very special because he wasn't gathered with the other disciples that Sunday. Most likely he just wanted to be alone; often those in grief do want to be alone, and that is not a bad thing in and of itself. That's understandable. But trust me on this ... it is not good to stay alone too long. There's a sermon in itself here, but it is not good to keep on neglecting the fellowship of other disciples. Thomas missed "church" that Sunday, and as a result, his despondency only deepened, his doubts only grew and his despair only increased ... he missed the doubt-dispelling, despair-destroying, faith-exhilarating blessing the other disciples received from Jesus' presence when they gathered together that Sunday.

On another related side note, I can't wait until we can physically gather again. Pray for our governing officials, as well as for all affected by this disease and the subsequent harsh measures of quarantine. 'The damage being done every day is enormous. I read Disney is losing \$30 million a day. 22 million people are newly unemployed *(that's 22 times the entire population of our state!)*, including my nurse daughter in Ohio ... in fact, 43,000 medical workers across the country have been put out of work these past weeks! Do we realize how against our nature this whole thing is? Human beings in general and Christians in particular are not designed, not created, to sit around behind locked doors trembling in fear. The hyperbolic sermon title was borrowed from an excellent commentary I read; I won't go into the contents other than to acknowledge use of the title and its implication ... that we are meant to go out LIVE, to make a living, to do good with the life we have, as nobody gets out of this life alive. Again, pray our representatives will make wise, balanced and life-enhancing decisions. End of side note.

Back to Thomas. When the other disciples told him, *"Thomas, we saw Him! Right there with us last Sunday! We saw the Risen Lord!"* Thomas replied, *"Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."* Some have seen Thomas' response as cynical and even obstinate, but I don't think so. I think Thomas refused to be *personally* satisfied with the Christ *his friends* experienced. Imagine Thomas saying, *"I am not going to be satisfied with your second-hand reports! I haven't seen Him, and I want to see Him, and I need to see Him in such a way that I want to touch His hands and feet and side myself!"* He was not satisfied to live on the "faith experience" of others. That's good! That's a healthy doubt and determination that is worthy of our emulation. Don't be satisfied with your parents' or grandparents' experience of Jesus Christ, don't be satisfied with your pastor's experience of Jesus Christ, your wife's, your husband's, your child's, your friends' or anyone else's experience of Jesus Christ ... experience the living Jesus Christ for yourself, and don't be satisfied until you do! And Thomas got his request granted. On the Sunday after Easter Thomas is now with the disciples, and this time he does indeed encounter the living Lord for himself. Jesus came to him and showed His hands, His side, and said, *"Stop doubting and believe."* Which might be paraphrased, "Stop doubting and live!" or "Thomas, stop acting like I am dead and gone; and live accordingly!" Thomas responded by saying, "My Lord and my God."

Again, "Blessed are those who believe who have not seen," says Jesus. Yes, believing is seeing. It is in believing, it is through the eyes of faith, that we really begin to see. It is in believing that we have hope. It is in believing that we are freed to really live.

And believing in the Risen Christ will change how we see everything.