

“Believe It to See It”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Second Sunday of Easter

Edina Morningside Community Church; April 8, 2018

**John 20:19-31**

*When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But 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.”*

*A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

It's been years since I gave it much thought, but the season of Easter and resurrection has me considering transformation of another kind—a caterpillar into a butterfly. Imagine for a moment that you are a caterpillar, one of those little fuzzy brown, green or yellow worms that you sometimes see inching along a stick. You've grown up and spent your whole life on one plant, perhaps a stalk of milkweed. Food, shelter, and everything else you need is there. Your frame of reference is limited to what's right in front of you: this stalk, this stem, this leaf. That's the whole world, as far as you know.

But then, something completely unforeseen happens to you. (This part might be hard for those who get creeped out by insects.) Your caterpillar instincts somehow lead you to hang upside down, suspended from a twig, wriggling and twisting around an imaginary hula hoop, until your body has produced a chemical shell around you, a chrysalis. You disappear into this hardened-protein sarcophagus, apparently dead, and stay that way for days. Hidden inside, your body parts are rearranging themselves, with shape-shifting antennae, feet and body, plus something altogether strange—wings. When the chrysalis cracks open, you are a new creature in place of the old one, though as yet unable to fly with those new wings. First, you must crawl out of the broken shell that was your resting place, open your new body into the light, unfold your wings by filling them with fluid from your body cavity, start to flutter above a few plants, drink the nectar of flowers for energy, and only then have the strength to journey far and wide.

What a head trip this must be for caterpillars! They have no experience whatsoever that would help make sense of this new emergence. Though once earthbound (apparently forever), they now can climb higher than human beings, with wings that can carry for thousands of miles. The transformation would be unbelievable, except we know it happens in millions of creatures every year.

Considering all this, it makes sense that the caterpillar's change into a butterfly has been a metaphor of Christ and his resurrection for millennia. What once was a tomb turns out to be a womb, opening on Easter morning to reveal Christ in a new, transcendent form. Yet, it must have seemed inconceivable. No wonder Mary, the other disciples and Thomas have trouble believing this impossible news!

We read in John's gospel that the same day of Christ's resurrection, not long after Mary returns from speaking with Jesus and tells the others, Christ himself appears through a door locked by fear of those

outside. He bids them peace, shows his wounds, breathes the Holy Spirit on them, then commissions them with his own authority, power and mission. Thomas is the only one not there with them, and when he hears what happened he cannot believe it. Thomas gets a bad rap for being unconvinced by the testimony of others. We still chide people who are skeptical, calling them “Doubting Thomases”. But Thomas’ response is the sensible one for every caterpillar when there’s been no experience of the butterfly. “I’ll wait until I see it for myself. If I see it with my own eyes, I *will* believe it.” Thomas has a thoroughly modern and understandable approach. He’s waiting for there to be enough evidence that it can be photographed, shown on the TV news, and researched to establish reasonable proof.

There’s a lot to be said for, “If I see it, then I’ll believe it.” This is the comfortable place of Western thought, empirical philosophy, and the scientific method. It’s given rise to tremendous advances in medicine, science and engineering. Yet today, as society has turned the corner from the modern world into what’s being called “postmodernity”, we’re coming to realize that solid, tangible proof is no longer guaranteed to be persuasive. Even well-researched evidence that leads to scientific consensus can be dismissed as “fake news” by those who disagree. A person’s *beliefs* now wield more persuasive power than in any other decade of our lives, and what we perceive as fact and truth is filtered through those beliefs. The twenty-first century has a new motto: “If I *believe* it, then I’ll *see* it.”

We could spend a lot of time weighing the pros and cons of postmodernity. But given that this is how things are today, consider the upshot: beliefs have the power to shape reality. What we set our eyes and hearts on, starts to frame what seems possible. Sports psychologists have actually known this for some time, which is why they make regular use of visualization. Coaches might lead an athlete through a particular move frequently in her imagination, so that when it comes time to do so on the court that player has already experienced making the move successfully. Likewise, those who have the audacity to imagine that the world could be different help to create the conditions for that change. This is why we’ve had student protests go further than long-established adult groups working for sensible gun safety measures over years. This is how adamant teachers in West Virginia and Oklahoma have seen more advances for equity in recent *weeks* than in recent *decades* beforehand. Both groups refuse to be constrained by the apparent “facts of the matter”, because they are inspired by a vision of what could and should be. Belief enhances the likelihood of something coming to pass. “If I *believe* it, then I’ll *see* it.”

Maybe this is why, though Jesus gives Thomas an experience of sight, he especially blesses “those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus is talking about *us*; he’s blessing *us*. *We* are the ones who have come after, not seeing the risen Christ as Thomas did, yet coming to believe nevertheless. We are the latest inheritors of a tradition which extends back to Christ himself, and which carries his death-defying vision forward by the power of his eternal Spirit. Those first disciples encountered the risen Christ and told of the experience to others, who received it and sent it on to still more, in a multiplying, transformative vision of God’s hope for the world. As each generation comes to pray with Jesus “your kingdom come on earth as in heaven”, more and more people have come to believe in its possibility, and so bring it into sight. After all, if violence, betrayal, torture and crucifixion are not the end, if even death itself can be overthrown, what else can we recognize as risen and real, though old beliefs would tell us it’s dead and gone?

The resurrection calls on disciples to undergo our own transformation—from passive witnesses to active apostles—now sent ourselves as ambassadors of Christ. Visions and possibilities once considered strange by the world start to arrange themselves anew within us. The way will be perceived first by the imagination and held as a matter of faith, the first step of coming to pass in reality. What are the impossibilities that you dream of, the wings taking shape in the cocoon? What would God dream of—for you, for the church, for the world? What are the dried-up husks of old assumptions and impossibilities that we are called to crawl out of and leave behind for the sake of God’s new future? Caterpillars, what impossible wings are we growing now? Because Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia, and amen.