

March 30, 2008
I Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-29
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“What Faith Sees”

All of us are familiar with the Beatitudes of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In the beatitudes, Jesus turns the world we know upside down by pronouncing the poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry, the thirsty and the persecuted blessed. They are blessed because they see and live, not on the basis of the values of the world, but on the basis of their relationship with God and their place in God's kingdom. These are not the only Beatitudes of Jesus. There is also an Easter Beatitude.

On that first Easter evening, Jesus appears to the frightened disciples who are huddling together behind locked doors. In the midst of their fear, he breathes into them the gift of the Holy Spirit. They discover a new power and a new peace. In this peace and in this power, he sends them out to be his witnesses. Thomas is not there. Like a lot of us, Thomas is a person who relies on his senses to know what is real. He wants to see Jesus for himself; he wants to hear his voice; he wants to touch the wounds in his body. He wants to know for sure that Jesus is risen from the dead.

One week later, Jesus appears again to the disciples. This time Thomas is among them. Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds and to have faith. Thomas cries out, “My Lord and my God.” Then Jesus pronounces the Easter Beatitude, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

I have never seen Jesus with my own eyes. I have never heard his voice with my own ears. I have never touched his transformed, risen body. I have never seen the Holy Spirit as a descending dove or as tongues of fire. Yet, I have seen where Jesus has been. I have seen his presence in you. I have seen Jesus transform a person's life. I have felt his presence in my own life and discerned his voice in my own heart. I have seen how Jesus has taught me how to forgive. I have seen Jesus heal a family's wounds. I have seen the Holy Spirit fill a church with faith, hope and love. I have seen the Spirit move the people of faith to take up the pain of others and to work for justice. Jesus is the spiritual gravity of our lives. We cannot see gravity, but we feel its effect and we know its power to keep the universe in balance. The Spirit is like the wind. We cannot see the wind, but we can see its power to move the trees, to chase the clouds, to stir the storm and to lift the waves. We believe in many things we cannot see. We depend upon things we cannot see: gravity, wind, magnetism and the movement of subatomic particles. More than that, we depend utterly upon Jesus Christ, whom we cannot see, but we know through faith to be with us and for us. This Easter Beatitude is for us: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

What does faith see? I want to share with you three things faith sees. Faith sees a Savior who is risen and present with us in the Holy Spirit. Faith understands that Jesus is not just an historical figure from the past or great moral teacher whose sayings are remembered beyond his death. We believe that Jesus lives. He is the center of our lives and he will stand as judge and redeemer at the end of history. In the First Letter of Peter we hear that by God's mercy we have been given “a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Peter goes on to write that even though we do not see him now, we believe in him.

Many people are uncertain of the truth and confused about how to live their lives. What are the enduring values? What are the things worth living and dying for? What does the future hold? This confusion leads to people trying to find themselves or lose themselves through addiction to money, achievement, pleasures, power, political ideologies or even the good opinion of others. We can try to build a life on any of these things, but sooner or later we may find that we have built our lives on quicksand. The only sure foundation is Christ. He is the incarnate word of God. He holds the past, present and future together. To see Christ through the eyes of faith is to see God.

Yesterday, a number of staff members from Second attended the funeral service of Mr. Bill Anderson who was a member

of our staff for ten years. Bill died after a long battle with cancer. We attended the service in his Methodist congregation where Bill had served as a leader and trustee for many years. It was a large gathering of friends and family. We gathered to mourn his death, but even more we gathered to celebrate his life. Friends and family bore witness to Bill's faith, gentle spirit, warm heart and life of Christian service. These were the same characteristics that we at Second had come to know and love in Bill Anderson. Bill was the same person wherever he went and in whatever he did. He saw Jesus through the eyes of faith. His life bore witness to him. In the testimony of family and friends, the music, the scriptures, the prayers, we could see the presence of the risen Lord in that celebration.

Faith sees a church that is alive in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are mistaken when we think of the church simply as an organization, a building or an institution. The church is the body of Christ in the world. We may not see the flames of the Holy Spirit in the church, but the church is on fire with the Spirit's power. For over 100 years our own Presbyterian tradition has said that one of the great ends of the church is "the exhibition of the Kingdom of heaven to the world." When people look at the church, they will see God's intention for how human beings are to live together and want to be drawn into its life. The church is to practice mutual forgiveness, compassion, sharing, encouragement and love. The church reaches out in mission to the world.

This past week I visited with Mrs. Linda Valentine, who is the Executive Director of the office of the General Assembly in Louisville, and other members of the General Assembly Staff. The meeting was set to discuss the new things that we are doing in local and global mission at Second and how our initiatives fit into the new mission initiatives of the larger denomination. She is a remarkable Presbyterian Elder who is giving her life to help the Presbyterian Church fulfill its calling to be the body of Christ in the world. Her love for the church, her enthusiasm for mission and her understanding of the deeply shared spiritual life of the community of faith helped me appreciate even more the spiritual life and calling of the church.

Faith also sees a world that is full of possibilities. Almost every day we are bombarded with bad news about the economy and the seemingly endless conflict in Iraq. Many families live in fear in their neighborhoods where drugs, gangs and random violence seem to prevail. Nations are plagued with increasing conflict among ethnic or tribal groups. We face unsettling news about the environment: toxins in the water supply increase birth defects; an ice shelf the size of Manhattan breaks off of Antarctica; energy becomes an increasingly scarce and costly resource. It is easy to become disheartened, cynical and hopeless. We could take our cue for life from these discouraging reports. Through the eyes of faith, we see a different world. We see a world in which Christ is bringing about the transformation of all things.

Some time ago in another state, I met a man who had been going to a prison to visit each week for a number of years. He began going because his son had been incarcerated there. He said it was hard to see what was happening in the prison. Due to financial cutbacks and a change in philosophy, the prison was being stripped of many of the rehabilitative services such as occupational training and educational opportunities. The library was gone; the shop had been moved to an outbuilding that didn't have enough electricity to run the equipment. He wondered what would happen to these men when they were released without any improved education or skills. After his son was released, he could have quite going to the prison, but he kept going each week. He saw something that others did not see. He saw the presence of Jesus in the worst and most hopeless situations and even in the hardest human hearts. In a foolish and unbelieving world, he saw the redemptive and transforming presence of the risen Lord.

Some people look at the world and only see overwhelming problems; others look at the world through the eyes of faith and see divine possibilities. Dr. Joe Mamlin, the field director of the IU-Kenya medical partnership says that, in spite of everything the program is doing, we are losing the battle against AIDS in Africa. Instead of throwing in the towel, giving up in despair and coming home, Joe and Sarah Ellen Mamlin are developing new strategies and redoubling their efforts. Dr. Mamlin has said that we have to move from treatment to prevention to win the battle. The Mamlins are motivated by a vision of God's creation where there is life, peace, abundance and health for all.

Jesus gave this Easter Beatitude for us: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Through the

eyes of faith we see a living Savior, a church on fire with the Spirit and a world that is full of God's possibilities.