

## Unless I See

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Sunday after Easter, April 22, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16:5-11; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

It's the first Sunday after Easter and it's evening. The week before Jesus had appeared to a number of disciples but Thomas had not been there. The disciples told Thomas they'd seen the Risen Christ. Thomas refused to believe their story but finally acquiesced to his friends invitations and met with the disciples on the first Sunday after Easter. Jesus again appeared to them and showed his hands and side to Thomas and invited Thomas to reach out and touch him. Thomas believed when he saw. You say, "How blessed Thomas was to have seen the risen Christ." Yes, he was blessed but Jesus says that we who have believed and yet have not seen are more blessed than Thomas. To those who feel cheated of the blessing of having actually seen the Risen Christ he assures that we are actually more blessed than Thomas.

This is a strange thing to say. You'd think that Thomas, who actually saw Jesus risen from the dead, would be more blessed. Certainly you'd think that someone who had felt the touch of the Risen Christ and place his hands in the marks of the nails and in the wounded side would be far more blessed than we who believe on the basis of another's testimony. Think of the millions of God's people who lived before the Resurrection- men and women who lived in hope of the coming of God's Messiah. They never saw him though they longed for his coming and trusted the day would come. Think of the billions of Christians who've lived since the Resurrection who

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didn't have the opportunity to see the Risen Christ. Only a relatively few of God's people saw the Risen Christ. You'd think these few who saw the Risen Christ would be of all people most blessed.

The Bible doesn't say exactly how many people saw the Risen Christ. Paul summarized the appearances in 1 Corinthians 15: "...he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time... then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also..." When you add all these up we have a total of a little over 500 people who actually saw the Risen Christ. You'd think that of all God's people these would be most blessed. How blessed it would be to see and touch the Risen Christ.

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How blessed I'd be if I had seen the Risen Christ. I think that if I had actually seen the Risen Christ I'd be a more faithful Christian. Imagine what it would mean to have the Risen Christ appear to you and to hear him say in his own words, "Peace to you." Imagine what it would be like to have the Risen Christ breathe upon you and fill you with His Holy Spirit. I think that I could face just about any temptation or crisis in life. I could always look back and say, "I saw the Risen Christ. I touched him." If I had seen the Risen Christ I would count myself most blessed.

There's an old children's hymn,

I think when I read that sweet story of old,  
When Jesus was here among men,  
How He called little children as lambs to His fold,  
I should like to have been with them then.

I wish that His hands had been placed on my head,  
That His arm had been thrown around me,  
And that I might have seen His kind look when He said,

"Let the little ones come unto Me."

That speaks for me. I wish I'd seen the risen Christ. I've never seen the Risen Christ, at least not with my physical eyes. I believe in the Risen Christ. I've bet my life on him but I've never seen him. Yet Jesus says that I'm more blessed than Thomas who did see and touch the Risen Christ. How can that be?

Think of the people you feel are most blessed by God. I think of a woman who recovered from a life-threatening illness and she gives thanks to God for this gracious sign of healing. There's someone I'd count as very blessed by God. I think of a family who decided to tithe. It was a difficult decision for them. They prayed about it and finally they took the plunge ~~and God has blessed that family. The more they contributed to the work of~~ Christ the more they've prospered. We would probably all say that God has blessed them. I think of another young man who has had a wonderful conversion experience. He'd been an agnostic. Didn't believe in God. Involved in drugs, alcohol. Dabbled in the occult. Several years ago he had a vision of the Risen Christ. His life was dramatically changed. Now there's someone whom I would call greatly blessed by God.

But these aren't the most blessed according to Jesus and when we think that these are the most blessed we fall prey to a common danger today among Christians. There's a cult that's popular today, especially among Christians, that if we're faithful; if we pray; if we worship faithfully; if we tithe; if we're honest and trust in Jesus, God will bless us with extraordinary religious experiences, promotions, health, happy marriages, perfect children and all kinds of visible blessings. It ain't necessarily so.

*Christ pronounced most*

Those whom ~~God~~ <sup>Christ</sup> has blessed ~~the~~ <sup>most</sup> believe without ever having seen. You have a life-threatening disease and you pray but God doesn't heal. You begin to tithe and instead of prospering you're faced with overwhelming financial problems. <sup>you're a</sup> ~~The~~ <sup>who</sup> honest doubter ~~so~~ <sup>so</sup> much wants to have an assured faith... you long to see the Risen Christ but that dramatic disclosure never takes place. You believe but you never ~~enjoy~~ <sup>feel</sup> the peace and assurance and ~~sense~~ of the presence of God that other Christians speak of. You trust God's promises of forgiveness but you don't see in your own life the change that you hoped for. Many faithful people don't experience healing, nevertheless they cling to the gospel promise that that the disease destroying their bodies doesn't have the power to speak the final word. And if I understand what Jesus says correctly he's saying that these are the people who are most blessed. *I find this tremendously comforting --- I believe but I haven't had no dramatic religious experience...*

Perhaps the best commentary on our Gospel lesson is found in our Epistle Lesson read this morning. There Peter writes, "... for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom not having seen, you love; and whom, though you do not now see, you yet believe in, and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith-- this faith that believes without seeing-- you obtain the salvation of your souls."

"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."