

E A S T E R 2, Apr. 23, 2017, Year A

- I often refer to [Dewitt Jones](#). He is a former photographer for National Geographic. If you have watched any of his instructional videos, you might remember how he uses these familiar words: *"Believe it, and you will see it!"* I want to quote those words today because they *appear to contradict* the Disciples' experience of Jesus' resurrection. As our Gospel tells us, *ten* of them [saw](#) Jesus, and *only then* [believed](#). A week later, the *same* thing happened for [Thomas](#). In other words, *all eleven of them did not believe until they saw*. For them, as well as for the first women visitors to the tomb, *seeing came before believing*.
- And so, we can ask this: *Is Dewitt Jones advocating an approach that goes against the experience of the first disciples, or of the holy women who first witnessed Jesus' resurrection appearance?* We are likely to wonder about the photographer's familiar saying because we *depend on* empirical observation to discern what is real and true. Therefore, he might sound *like* he's advising us to engage in *fantasy*, in wanderings of *imagination* or in *wishful thinking*. His counsel might further remind us of those who tell others *simply to envision* something, *like being rich*. And that *by doing so, believing makes the money roll in*. *Given this*, our emphasis on *Appreciative Inquiry* here at Grace, and our attention to God-given *abundance*, may *appear vulnerable* to the same suspicion.
- So here, I offer a new twist on the photographer's saying. I *don't* assume Jones is making an *either/or* choice, concerning *which comes first, seeing or believing*. Instead, I think he's inviting us to discover *a both-and*, which we may *not yet* perceive. If our believing is *limited* to what we see, in an *empirical science kind of way*, we *won't* believe much. *Yet, if we are open to other real* kinds of seeing, then *new seeing may lead to new believing*. *Equally, taking the risk of new thinking and new believing can lead to new kinds of seeing*. In other words, *seeing and believing are mutually inter-dependent*, and beneficial to one another, just as are knowing and loving.¹

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- Jones' point is that, there are *true* and *real* aspects of the world that we *overlook* because we are *not mentally or emotionally open* to them. (pause)
- Recently, I read a book by the philosopher, [Alvin Plantinga](#), who started his career at Calvin College, and has now retired in this area. His book is about the *apparent, but not real*, conflict between science and theistic religion.² His main point is this: Science is *not* the enemy of religion. Instead, theistic religion's *real* enemies are *naturalism* and *materialism*. Ironically, *like some forms of religious faith*, naturalism or materialism *rule out in advance certain ways of knowing, and certain things to be known*. Yet, *proper science will always be open to new evidence*. And science *alters existing* hypotheses, or *forms new* ones, to take into account *new evidence*. But *naturalism* and *materialism* begin with *a limiting foundational belief* ~ the belief that '*reality*' *only includes* things we can *physically observe and measure*. But *this belief is an add-on* to science, and *not part of it*.
- *In other words, if I have not seen* something, it *only means it hasn't yet become actual* in my experience. It *doesn't necessarily mean that thing doesn't exist*. It *may be real*, and it may be *actual* in *other people's* experience—a possibility to which I need to remain open.
- So, in effect, what Dewitt Jones means is this: '*Be open! Be open to new and unexplored ways of seeing, which can lead you to bigger and or to new beliefs.*' (pause)
- The contemporary sculptor, [Justin Matherly](#), in his current show, *may be on to something*. [note handout] Each of his works is *untitled*, but each bears the sub-title, *Fear, Anxiety, Joy*. The 2016 piece I have put in your worship bulletin provides an example, which seems mainly to embody the first two emotions.³ Picture this sculpture as *representing one of the eleven, at least-sometimes-hiding, Disciples*. Feeling *incomplete*, and experiencing at first

the '*affect*' of two basic human emotions, *fear* and *anxiety*.⁴ They stand *frozen* in themselves, *unable* to leave their enclosed space, as if *immobile* with literal 'feet of clay.' They *had been* believers, at least of a sort. But at the time John relates in his story, they appear to have *lost their faith* in Jesus.

- Notice *this* in relation to our Gospel today. It's the familiar story about *the apparent difference* between *Thomas'* faith, and that of *the other ten* disciples. As I observed a moment ago, *none of the eleven believed until they saw Jesus*, a fact which was *also* true of the women visitors to the tomb. Yet, *so far as we know*, Jesus does not physically appear to people in our own day, *as he did* to the original eleven. And so, we can't make *believing* in Jesus' resurrection dependent upon *seeing* him *in the same* way as did his first followers. *There are three important reasons for this:*
- *First*, in his Ascension, *Jesus went from being only in one place, at one time, to being in all places, all the time*. And he made the transition from being only with some people at one time, to being with all people all the time. Now, through his Resurrection, we can *all* know, and be with, him *at the same time*.
- *Second*, the Disciples were at first not prepared to accept that Jesus would *suffer and die, much less rise again*. We are in a *very different* place from them. For we have benefitted from their reflection on experiencing the Risen Jesus, and how this transformed their reading of Scripture. We can now see, *as they at first could not*, how Jesus' death and resurrection were *part of a larger divine plan* for salvation history.⁵
- *Third*, there is another way our perception differs from the Disciples hiding behind locked doors. *For we now see the Risen Jesus in ourselves and in each other*. This is a critical difference between our experience and theirs. For we *see* the Risen Lord in each other, *and this leads to our believing*. We

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are neither frozen, nor immobile! As a result, both our children, and newcomers to our community, *can see the Resurrection in us*, and can come to believe, as well.

- *In each case, there is an element of new seeing leading to believing. And, in each case, new believing can lead to seeing... and, to joy!* I spoke about this to some extent last Sunday, in terms of how and where we experience the Risen Lord's *power* and *light*.
- Every year on this Sunday, when we hear about *Jesus' back to back appearances* to the disciples, *I try to say the same thing. The ten disciples on his first visit were no more faithful or prepared to believe without seeing than Thomas was. And Jesus granted to Thomas *nothing more* than he had already disclosed and given to the other ten. Both they, and the holy women who were the first witnesses to Jesus' Risen presence, were unprepared to believe, and in fact did not believe, until they had seen. And then, they experienced that third, and most important experience, *joy*.*
- John's whole point, in telling about these things, is to focus on what Thomas *says, and not on what he does*. After Thomas sees the very same thing the other ten saw *before they believed*, he then says something pivotal and unique. Perceiving the Risen Jesus *rightly*, he says, "*My Lord and my God!*" And this is precisely what John prepares us to perceive: *That we will see him in one another. We can now see his Risen presence, and his gloriously transformed wounds, in ourselves and in one another.* And John prepares *us*, so that *we*, too, can say about the Risen one, "*my Lord, and my God!*"



Justin Matherly, *(Untitled)*; *Fear Anxiety Joy*, 2016

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.

Notes:

¹ I owe this observation about the interdependency, between knowing and loving, to my doctoral supervisor, Oliver O'Donovan, who would himself attribute the insight to St. Augustine.

² Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ This particular figure reminds me of the Isle of Lewis chess pieces, dating back to the 12th Century, preserved at the British Museum. Probably fashioned originally in Trondheim, Norway, they were found in the vicinity of Uig on the Isle of Lewis (in the norther part of the Outer Hebrides, Scotland, some time before 11 April 1831. (these details are gleaned from the British Museum website)

⁴ The use of the word 'affect' in this particular way reflects the sculptor's word choice.

⁵ I want to credit an essay by Jack Crabtree, of Gutenberg College, titled "Two Reflections on Thomas and the Story of Easter," for some of the insights noted here.