

Witness for the truth

Acts 5.12a, 17-22, 25-29; Ps 111; Rev 1.1-19; John 20.19-31

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist
Saint John the Evangelist (Massena NY)
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I am willing to bet that I can tell you who you voted for in the last election. I'm sure I can. You voted for someone you trust. You did not put the reins of leadership into the hands of an Indiana Jones like adventurer who had lived all sorts of experience. You didn't even entrust leadership to someone who was necessarily the smartest person you knew, an Einstein like figure. You voted primarily for someone you felt you could trust.

Trust is one way of knowing whether something is true or not. But it is only 1 of 4 ways to know if something is true or not: you can see it, you can reason it, you can feel it, or you can believe -- that is, trust -- it. And I would say, when it comes to important things like the leadership of a community or a nation or the world, trust is the most important thing.

For some people, seeing is the most important way to know whether something is true. Like Thomas, some people only know something to be true when they have good, hard empirical evidence that it is so. I am standing in front of you. The lights are on. You can see what I am wearing.

But there are limits. You can't see everything. We accept as true that the world is round, but very few of us have ever been into space to know that it is round. We think that we saw on TV men landing on the moon, but we weren't there. None of us have ever seen an "inalienable right" but we still think that they exist. As far as I know, none of us has ever seen a grave opened and a person walk out, and yet we know that it happened to Jesus.

For other people, reasoning things out is the best way to know whether something is true or not. They realize that you cannot see everything. We know that, whether we can see 4 apples on the pulpit, that $2 + 2 = 4$. You say: "but that's only because they have seen 2 apples + 2 apples = 4 apples". But, has anyone seen 1 billion + 1 billion to know that it equals 2 billion? Of course not. Or has anyone seen that it is generally better to do good than to do harm? No, yet we still know it to be true.

But, reason has its limits, too. Is it better to marry this girl or that girl, this guy or that guy? You can stack up pros and cons rationally in two categories, but in the end, reason cannot alone decide what is the right thing to do. Presented with 2 equally compelling truths, reason cannot always tell you which is "more" true. Reason can tell us and people like Thomas that it is not logical that people rise from the dead. And, since most of us have never seen a person rise from the dead, then there is no resurrection from the dead. And yet there is.

For other people again, there is a way of knowing truth that goes beyond seeing and beyond reason. For them, there is a kind of inner knowledge, a kind of gut feeling, a 6th sense that this is true. Some of you may remember years ago when, in another election, a slogan became the dominant slogan of the election: you know in your heart that he's right. Beyond what you can see; beyond what might even be rational. Or, you remember the disciples on the Emmaus road, after they failed to see Jesus walking beside them and talking to them, after they failed rationally to realize that this was their Lord, there is a moment when Jesus breaks bread and disappears and then they recognize him. But, they think back and they say: we should have recognized him on the road because "did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke?" This is similar to Mary's experience in the garden, an experience you heard about last week in the Gospel reading, when she fails to recognize Jesus and thinks him to be the gardener, but then we he calls out her voice, she senses within herself that this is indeed her Lord.

But, there are limits even to this kind of knowing. It is a powerful form of knowing, but it can be wrong. When I was growing up, I was sure that something was hiding under my bed. I couldn't see it; I had been told very rationally by my parents that it was not so; but it was there, and I knew it! (Today it is still there! It's my dirty socks.) On that big date, you might be tempted to give in to the words that Debbie Boon sang some years back: "How can it be wrong when it feels so right?" Or, even more seriously, there are people who hear the voice of a Jim Jones or a David Koresh and they just know that he's the one, the one who will lead them into all truth. This kind of knowing is very powerful and it can lead people into heroic actions and into insane cults.

This is the very reason why the fourth form of knowing truth is so important: knowledge through trusting, fiduciary knowledge. There is knowledge that comes not because you have seen something yourself, or because you know something to be true, or even because you have a good and powerful feeling about it. There is knowledge that comes through the word of others when you assent to it because they can be trusted. I am not speaking here about those who believe anything they hear someone say: Uncle Norman says it's going to snow cows this afternoon. I am talking about believing what trustworthy witnesses say. This is something that a jury must decide in every court case: they haven't been there at the crime scene; the story might rationally be completely implausible; they might get a really good feeling from one client and a really bad feeling from the other.... but it is the witnesses whose story must be believed or disbelieved. That is where the truth lies.

Thomas obviously had a strong feeling for Jesus. He had become one of his followers and been with him for a long time. But, Jesus had died and was gone and so was the spark that ignited Thomas' following of Jesus. Thomas reasoned that Jesus was dead and that the dead don't rise, at least I've never seen one rise, so therefore Jesus is not coming back, not, that is, unless I see him. And then Jesus does appear to him. What's Thomas to do at this point? He has set the conditions for belief and Jesus has fulfilled them: Thomas cannot doubt that Jesus is standing before him, with the marks of the crucified on his body. And Thomas confesses.

This is where many of us stop the story of Thomas. We turn off the projector and say: "good, old Thomas, in the end he came through. Well, that just goes to show you that if you don't believe,

you should just ask for proof. And God will give it to you." And that is a lie, not only because God has given proof once and for all but also because it denies what Jesus goes on to tell Thomas.

How many times have you, probably in your youth, asked God to give you a sign that he is real? "Write your name in the heavens, God, and I'll believe you." Ever done that? I did, when I was trying to believe, and was walking through the Pyrenees mountains of Spain: I begged God to show me his name in the heavens so that I could believe. "Heal my mother and I'll know you are real." Have you ever said that? There are times when God does just that, but it is not to show himself to be real. It is usually for a larger purpose than the one you and I realize. There is nothing to commend Thomas' request for proof because God does not bring proofs of his existence to our door at our request like some sort of pizza delivery man. Our God is the Lord of the universe. He is loving but he is not a delivery boy.

It is also a lie to say that we should commend Thomas for his doubt because Jesus goes on to say to him. Jesus says to him what really counts. Jesus says to him that he has done well to believe when he saw Jesus' risen body BUT that it is so much better to believe EVEN WITHOUT SEEING. "And, how will anyone be able to do that?" The way they will know by believing is by believing what those who HAVE seen will say. Those who have not seen will have to trust those who have in order to know what can ONLY be known in that way but which MUST be known for someone to be saved. Those who come after Thomas will have to believe him and the other witnesses to Jesus' resurrection to know the truth: Jesus died but has been raised by God. They will have to trust the witnesses, witnesses that Thomas knew to be faithful-- how long had they been together? -- and not do as Thomas had and doubted.

And this is where it concerns us. For, these are the characteristics of those who witness regularly to the greatest truth of all, a truth that has been made known to humans in these last days about who they are and who God is, the truth that the one man stripped and tied to the cross is the lamb that God has provided to take away the sin of the world. And, if you are going to be a witness for that one and to pass on this truth to others, you are going to have to be completely trustworthy. Whatever you say, no matter how much or how little, must be COMPLETELY believable so that what you can and do say WILL be believed by those who have not yet known. For there is NOTHING that guarantees the truth to them other than the trustworthiness of the witness. If the witness is false in the least, the testimony is false and will be discarded. How will you be believed if you are false in any area of your life. Why should they believe you just because this is the religious part of your life, when in every other area of your life you lie, or you exaggerate, or you are not a faithful steward of the goods of others, or you gossip by not getting the facts of the story straight before you tell them to someone else?

So, let's ask ourselves the big question then: who ARE you going to trust? When you haven't seen something and yet you are told that it is true; when your mind tells you that it can't be so; when you just don't get that warm, fuzzy feeling inside that says "this feels right", but someone tells you: "this happened", will you believe that person?

In order to believe that person, that person has to be someone that you really trust.

- It has to be someone who doesn't regularly tell you lies or whom you know to be a liar. (Where were you last night? I was down at Bob's place.)
- It has to be someone who doesn't exaggerate. (I caught a fish and it was 6 feet long. I only had a bit to drink, officer.)
- It has to be someone you know whom you could trust with your life's savings. (Obviously not a Judas, who regularly stole money from the treasury box.)
- It has to be someone who is careful enough to get the story right and to make sure that the story is true before passing it on.

These are the characteristics of a witness. If any of them are missing in a witness, you will doubt what he or she says, be it the witness in the court room, be it your spouse who comes home late, be it your best friend, be it a follower of Jesus.

This does not mean that trustworthy people never make mistakes. But, it does mean that when they do, they acknowledge their errors and correct their ways. It is as true for aluminum workers and submarine captains, as it is for bank tellers or presidents, as it is for children or parents. You cannot be a witness if you are untrustworthy.

There is nothing else that guarantees the message that relies on something other than sight, or reason, or a feeling. The message is not guaranteed by ordination to apostolic succession (which may have limited the number of scoundrels who DO dip their hands into the treasury box but which cannot guarantee that a witness is reliable). It is not guaranteed by someone being the most intelligent (which is certainly a plus when it comes to figuring things out but which, as certain recent leaders of the free world have shown, is no guarantee of trustworthiness.). It is not even guaranteed by someone being an eyewitness, because an eyewitness can lie if it is in his or her interest to do so. It is guaranteed by trustworthy witnesses. That's what you and I are called to be. And that's what we are sent out to be: faithful witnesses.

It is great to be able to see. We also need to commend those who know. And, what motivates people to action is "when you know in your heart that he is right". BUT, it is even better to find and hold on to these witnesses that you can always believe, those whom you can always trust when they say: "yes, this is the way it was". If it is true in secular leadership, it is even more true in leadership in the Church, where truth is everything!

So, when you find these faithful witnesses, don't doubt; hold on -- and hold on for your life!