

1 John 1:5-2:2
John 20:19-31
April 7, 2024

What We Cannot See

Much of life involves an encounter with, or experience of, or interpretation of *what can't be seen*. If we had nothing more than our five senses, it would be impossible to live our lives. There are three ways of not being able to see; the first regards that which can be real, but exists outside our presence; and the other that which lies beneath the surface, and thus can't be seen by the eyes, or like the air, real, but invisible.

Take people as an example. Even though people *can* see one another, they have a difficult time interpreting what they see, the inner person is hidden, and besides they spend a great deal of time outside of each other's presence.

Even so, we are forced to conclude that even people who are away, somewhere else, are real. They don't go in and out of reality based solely on whether we can perceive their presence with our senses. The same can be said of places and things.

It is really very striking how little of the world one actually manages to see in person, even over the course of a lifetime. I went to Boston once. That is to say, I drove through. When I got to the most interesting part, the highway went under the ground and I came out on the other side without having seen anything except the tunnel. I have to believe that there is much more there than what I saw.

Even if one has been to someplace like Rome (which used to be a pilgrimage site for many Christians, I guess it still is), or Berlin or Mexico City or Bangkok, how much can one see driving through, even if there is no tunnel, or in a day, or even a week or a month?

How many people can one meet, become friends with? In a city like Columbus, or Delaware, one can live a lifetime and never actually meet most of the people. And getting to know any of them takes even longer.

Of the world's eight billion people, if one knows through personal encounter a hundred thousand, which is a stretch, it would be only an infinitesimal part to the whole. If one decided not to believe what one cannot see, one would not be able to believe very much.

Our minds are wired to know by way of analogy. We can see Columbus well enough, if we drive a little, and have seen it many times; and Lake Erie and the Appalachian Mountains, they seem to be around every time we pass through, so it isn't hard to make the leap that the Alps and the Rockies and the Himalayas are real, and so is Milan and Rio and Tokyo, as well as the Bering and the Baltic and the Black Seas, even if we have only seen them in pictures or heard about them in school.

But to know them by sight, or by analogy, or some logical formulation, which are both simply other forms of sight, is not even close to really knowing them. And

we are confronted today by what even analogy and logic and pictures and book learning cannot help us to see; the third way of not seeing, the eternal realm, the spiritual order, the world of the divine.

What Paul says in 2 Corinthians is true both in the way to comprehend the material world, and because it is necessary to discern the eternal. “We live by faith and not by sight.”

In one of the compelling scenes of the Resurrection, we find in the Gospel of John the encounter between Jesus and Thomas, known down through the history of faith as, “Doubting Thomas.” The issue of faith and sight is brought to the fore. The moniker doesn’t seem fair, because he was much like we are, wanting to see, *then believe*. Thomas has captured the spirit of the modern age; “there is a natural explanation for everything,” and one must question the reality of whatever can’t be observed.

So when Jesus first appeared to his disciples on Easter, and by chance Thomas wasn’t among them, he refused to believe, “I will believe it when I can see for myself and touch the wounds in his hands and side!”

Later, when Thomas was present and Jesus appeared, he had the opportunity to see what only a small handful of people have seen, the resurrected Lord before he ascended. Jesus told him, “stop being faithless,” or another way of saying it could be, “stop doubting and believe.”

Part of what Jesus means is that Thomas and all the rest of us should stop pretending that one can get by in this life believing only what one can see, or rationalized by analogy or logic, or read about. Even people who say they are committed to science have to accept in order to live, much that science can’t confirm.

And since science has been raised, I should make my usual caveat. I have said before, and want to maintain, science is good, and has taught us much, and should be affirmed and trusted as far as it goes. It can be very helpful, but about life’s most important questions, its power is limited, and certainly in regard to the questions of God.

We laugh at ourselves when we ask some of them, they seem so serious minded, yet in the end, after the laughter, we must still ask them:

What is the meaning of life?

Is there such a thing as truth? Not, as Buechner framed it, “particular truths,” those are the stuff of sight. Science is good at these, we can know about them, but, “truth itself,” the kind of truth Pilate meant when he asked Jesus, “what *is* truth,” or the kind of truth Jesus meant when he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

And questions about morality. Is there right and wrong, good and evil, or is it only a construction in our minds, a matter of opinion or taste?

And what about love and mercy, are they real? Over the millennia the human race has created words for these ideas because people have experienced, or hope to experience something like them in life. But are they real?

I'm drawn to the world of relationships which has inspired these ideas, because there, more than any other, is the realm of life in which we perceive the reality of that which can't be seen.

To believe as Jesus demands Thomas, is to believe that life *is* meaningful and that truth is known in relation to God and that the right and the good are not a matter of opinion no matter how people argue the details, and that mercy is a part of life's fabric as well as is love, and that forgiveness is not a personal decision but a spiritual reality - a gift given, even a divine mandate.

The first part of that mandate is to have faith, to believe that Jesus has been raised even though he as died. From there, everything falls into place, even if it hard to see that everything is in its place.

I suppose that on the surface, this life always seems out of sorts, unless we have deluded ourselves into thinking otherwise because *our* lives are in order, or we have created a context that is ordered, at least enough to be convincing. It is upsetting when we are not able to make that perception. The greater reality most of the time for most people in most places

reveals not only the threat, but the presence of a disordered world.

So we have two truths - the world *is* out of sorts and when we think it is not, it is likely because we have not dealt with reality very well. And the second truth is that everything *is* in place after all, even when all the evidence is to the contrary.

The secret of Easter is to have the faith that though the world in its worldliness is out of order, in terms of God's grace, *all is well*. Some of the time this is easy enough to believe, but we are always threatened by what we see, and know by sight, and must not hide from it, *while we trust what we cannot see*. "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe. That is the Easter faith.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)