

April 24, 2022, Sermon

John 20:19-31

How Will God Recognize You?

Opening: Lord, give me the confidence in the power of your Gospel. Grant me clarity in understanding and proclaiming the truths of your Word.

Good Morning.

This Gospel passage led to the moniker of the Doubting Thomas. Thomas was not the only doubter. The Apostles did not believe Mary Magdalene when she told them she had seen the risen Lord. Instead of reacting to her news with joy at the fulfillment of Jesus' promise, they holed up in a locked room, fearing for their lives. Mary needed only to hear Jesus say her name to recognize him as the risen Lord. The Apostles needed to see Jesus with their own eyes before believing. For both Thomas and the rest of the Apostles, seeing was believing.

When Jesus says, "Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are they who have not seen, and have believed," this really applies to all the Apostles. They needed this visual affirmation to carry out their mission to spread the word of forgiveness and salvation found within the arms of the Lord, with an abiding commitment without regard for personal safety. Jesus, ever aware of the nature of man, knew his appearing to them was necessary to transform their fear into faith, their own resurrection to become true believers.

The Apostles recognized Jesus by his wounds.

How will God recognize us?

Our faith binds us to God and He to us. Faith is how God recognizes us.

Throughout our life, the wounds we endure are healed only by faith. Our faith in Jesus allows us to rise up again, and again to continue our journey to him.

Faith puts us on God's radar, with the opportunity always to be born again despite life's trials and tribulations. Faith replaces our fear with hope.

In the temporal world, there are things that we cannot see but have faith in their existence. For one - the air that keeps us alive. We cannot live if we cannot breathe. Another unseen breath of life is the one God instilled in us. As God breathed life into us, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the Apostles to strengthen them for the task of spreading the word, with belief in the risen Lord as their primary tool.

Jesus, by appearing to the Apostles, laid the groundwork for a deep faith that would reach across centuries, long after he ascended into Heaven. These appearances to the Apostles were yet another instance of his understanding of the human condition, that there are various kinds of faith, and that faith comes in different ways and with differing intensities to different people.

Faith, as Howard Thurman wrote, and what God has always understood, has two fundamental demands that must be met within the human spirit for us to relate to God. First, God must be vast and limitless, that there is no thing that is outside of His apprehension. An example of this is when Jesus calms the storm. The Apostles, fearing for their lives, watched in awe at this "man" whom the seas obeyed.

The second fundamental demand is that God be personal and intimate, that man must have a sense of being cared for, of not being alone and stranded.

Jesus' power over nature, saving the temporal lives of the Apostles is later paired with Jesus appearing to them after his resurrection.

He did not leave them stranded and afraid. By appearing to them, He was willing to understand and adjust to their own path of believing, to grant them spiritual life.

God created us with the ability to make decisions but also to discern. Decision-making teaches you how to understand and weigh or reason through external information. Discernment teaches you to understand yourself, especially the obscured internal bits. Our challenge is to know when to decide and when to discern. Thus, the different paths that we all take to arrive at a deep and understanding faith.

God is not looking for slavish devotion. As with the prodigal son, he rejoices in those whose faith comes "at last", through whatever path is taken.

C.S. Lewis was regarded as one of the intellectual giants of the twentieth century and arguably one of the most influential writers of his day. Brought up as Christian, he became an atheist and followed the dictates of rationalism after his prayers to heal his dying mother did not save her life. His path back to faith was long, arduous, and full of detours. In the end, he recovered his faith in an unusual way, through the notion that faith was reasonable. His war-time broadcasts on Christianity, later becoming his book, "Mere Christianity," describes his notion of faith:

“To have Faith in Christ means, of course, trying to do all that He says. There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice. Thus, if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you.”

Faith is a smoldering ember in our hearts, put there by God, ready to ignite with the breath of the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus’ visits to the Apostles, there is no doubt that He gave them what He knew they needed to ignite a faith strong enough to spread the promise of salvation throughout the world. A faith that marked them and marks us as one of God’s own, His name stitched onto our souls.

Amen