

Second Sunday of Easter, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church, San Leandro
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon
20/20 Vision in Hindsight

Seeing is believing is a fairly popular cultural idiom. There was a mystery novel written in 1941 with the title *Seeing is Believing*. Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote a song by this title. There's a UK nonprofit movement by this title, and a 1934 British film. This is just the tip of the iceberg of our cultural interest in the idea: seeing is believing. In fact, this idea is the fundamental basis of science. Something in science is only a theory until it can be proven. A phenomenon must be observed, consistently, time and time again with no deviation before science accepts something as law. But it must be observed. There are only theories about the composition of the center of the earth, since we cannot observe that. So, in a sense we could think of Quantum Physics as God's joke on science, since it's proven by Quantum scientists that it's not possible to observe something without changing it.

So, in today's Gospel account, the resurrected Jesus comes to the gathering of the disciples. Thomas, however, was not present at that time. The other disciples find him and tell him, "We have seen the Lord!" You can imagine their enthusiasm. Thomas, however, must have thought they were crazy—remembering the vivid death of Jesus that had transpired just a few days earlier. Thomas basically says to the other disciples, "I'll believe it when I see it." Well, resurrected Jesus didn't just disappear right away after his resurrection—he actually hung around for days. A week after this first encounter, Jesus again came to the disciples, this time when Thomas was there. Can you imagine what that week was like for Thomas. All the disciples around him excited about having seen Jesus—who was killed in a gruesome death. He must have thought they had drunk some special kool aid or something, but I bet he also wondered in his heart if it could possibly be true. So, when Jesus comes to them a week later, he says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." This encounter not only emphasizes that Jesus' resurrection was a physical resurrection of his body—one that could be seen touched—but in this encounter Jesus says something quite universally relevant to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

They say we have 20/20 vision in hindsight. Looking back we can more easily see the hand of God at work in our lives, and often it's through the most difficult life experiences that God was working the most, bringing about healing, growth, and transformation. Have you had experiences like that in life. Where times seemed rough, but you look back and see how God was working through those experiences to bring you to a better place, spiritually, emotionally, or relationally?

There is a Taoist story of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically. "May be," the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful," the neighbors exclaimed. "May be," replied the old man. The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "May be," answered the farmer. The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into

the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "May be," said the farmer.

I believe that there is one lesson in life that if we could learn it—you and I alike—we would be in a pretty good spiritually place. This lesson has two parts to it: surrender and trust. It's kind of like that overused religious idiom, "Let go and let God." I prefer surrender and trust. I believe that God is working in and through all things to bring about healing, growth, and wholeness. He is not forcing, but guiding; not circumventing our own will, but working through our choices. Saint Paul, in his letter to the Romans, writes, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Now we must really unpack what that means, because horrific and evil things happen in this world. But, I am convinced that despite the bad, hurtful, and sometimes outright evil choices that people sometimes make, God is gently guiding all things and working through all circumstances to bring good out of evil, strength out of pain, and life from death. That is part of the Easter message. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "The Arc of the Moral *Universe* Is Long, but It Bends Toward Justice." Surrender and trust. That does not mean that we don't stand up for ourselves in bad situation. It means that we trust that God is with us, guiding us, and sometimes that's hard to see.

There have been a couple recent experiences in which I've come to learn this through some painful experiences. It's that whole 20/20 hindsight vision I was talking about. I began my process towards pursuing priesthood in Michigan, where I used to live. It was at my home church in rural Lexington, Michigan. I drove there for Indiana every other month to meet with my discernment committee for a whole year. They recognized my call and unanimously recommended me for priesthood to the vestry of the church, the head council. By that time, I had published my book on the Bible and homosexuality and was the founder of the world's first LGBT Christian social networking site. Because of what they called "gay activism as opposed to Christian activism" the vestry turned me down. Now you have to realize how devastating that blow was. My call to priesthood wasn't just a job application or a career path I was considering. It was my purpose- the reason I felt God placed me on this planet. One vestry member said, "We don't want Trinity to be the gay church," as if that would happen simply by recommending a gay candidate for priesthood. A church that has a gay priest is no more a "gay church" than a priest with a straight priest is a "straight church"—it's just one part of who someone is. My bishop said to me to go off to seminary anyway and we'd figure it out. Ultimately, we decided for me to start over the discernment process here in California, from the very beginning. That set me back a few years from my seminary peers, but looking back, God worked a greater good through that experience. I was brought to a diocese where I was and have been supported in the entirety of who I am. If that church in Michigan had signed the dotted line, they still wouldn't have been able to offer the kind of support I have found here that has been so rejuvenating and life-giving. At the time, the situation seemed bad, but God used it for a greater good. I believe now God was at work because I see, but it was hard to trust that at the time.

During my process here in California, things were going smoothly with recommendations by the discernment committee, vestry, Commission on Ministry, and when it finally came to me being approved for Candidacy, the last step before ordination, I got caught in a political fiasco. At that time there was tension between the Standing Committee and the bishop—I don't think that's a big secret—and the Standing Committee turned down my application, asking me to wait. Most

simply, the bishop supported me so they decided not to. That's an oversimplification, but quite fair to say. This angered the bishop, the Commission on Ministry, and every committee down the chain who were all standing in support of my call. It was a flashback of Michigan all over again. At the time, I had lost a great deal of faith in the institution. It was hard to see God at work, but looking back God was at work. It helped me with patience, a life lesson I continue to work on. It also allowed me time to work full-time as Program Manager of Episcopal Charities, which helped significantly towards paying off student debt from seminary. In many ways, those two years working as Program Manager, and paying off debt, gave me the freedom to follow my priestly call wherever it took me. 20/20 hindsight.

Early this year I was thinking and talking with a close friend about this notion of surrender and trust...even when things seem amiss. As my history has evidenced to me, it's often the most difficult times when God is working in hidden ways, guiding us even when we aren't even aware. I believe this because looking back I see this evidence. Thomas believed because he saw the wounds and saw Christ.

Now the challenge is, as Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." When the next thing comes along, can we trust that God is there? That God is always present. That if we trust God's guidance, he will be there leading us through difficult choices and uncomfortable circumstances. I've had a recent opportunity to exercise this trust, and just when God's provision is made clear, you can see on the horizon the next challenge and difficulty that could lead to either: anxiety and fear, or trust and calm. There's a test of an entire lifetime of trusting that is before us. Do we really believe that God is all-powerful? That's precisely what almighty means, when we say Almighty God in the creed and our prayers. Is the Almighty, one whom we can trust to be working above and in and through all things for a greater good—the good of which we may never see or quite understand. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." What would it look like in our lives, particularly in the anxious places of our lives, to join Thomas in proclaiming, "My Lord and my God!" recognizing God's hand at work? It's a journey of trust and this meal we are about to share is our sustenance along that journey.