

Sunday, April 12, 2026
The Second Sunday Of Easter

Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on
John 20:19-31

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Jesus Walks In

Imagine if right now, out of nowhere, on the altar steps, the Risen Jesus became visible in our midst.

How do you picture the scene?

Well, first of all forget the familiar images of a tall white man, blond, and with blue eyes. The Jesus you would see on these steps is five foot five, has dark hair, brown eyes, olive skin, a beard, a broad face, and a lean build typical of a first-century Galilean laborer. If we are honest, many of us might struggle to reconcile this sight with the way we have been accustomed to imagine him.

Then picture his facial expression: is he smiling, or severe-looking? How would he look at you and how would you meet his gaze?

Then what would he do? Make a speech? Or start walking in the central aisle and shake hands with you as we do when we exchange a sign of peace?

How long do you think you would be prepared to stay on and listen to him, talk to him, or pray with him? Hopefully, just as suddenly as he appeared, Jesus would disappear within an hour and a half or so – that is the weekly amount of time we are prepared to spend for worship. We all have plans for lunch and Jesus or not Jesus at one point we have to go back to our daily life!

Imagine then if this short, dark-skinned, broad-faced Jesus decides to walk down Fifth Avenue. Does he stop people and tell them: “I am Jesus. Look at the wounds in my hands and side?” How do you think people would react? You can be sure that in no time a police officer would ask for his papers, he would be handcuffed, bundled into a car by masked agents, and taken to a warehouse in the middle of nowhere. That would be the last we heard of him, until months later we learned that he was in prison in El Salvador, since deporting him to his country of origin is hardly an option.

We can go on...

If you are interested in this kind of thought experiment, I suggest you read the powerful *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*: there Jesus returns, is arrested by the Church, questioned by the Inquisition, silently endures condemnation, is eventually released, and told never to come back.

All of this came to mind as I returned to today's Gospel, especially Jesus' sentence "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:29).

Our initial reaction to this sentence might be to ask how believing can possibly be better than seeing. Surely *seeing* the Risen Jesus and the wounds on his hands and in his side, would be much more convincing! When we start reflecting on how this would play out though, we realize that Jesus might have a point.

Believing is better than seeing not because it is more virtuous, as though difficulty were its own merit, but because seeing, as our thought experiment shows, would make relationship with the Risen Jesus anything but easy. This is the reason why in John's Gospel the Risen Jesus did not appear to everyone, but only to the people who had known him before the crucifixion. Even for them this sight was challenging: several times we are told that his friends and disciples struggled to recognize him after the Resurrection. If it was difficult for those who knew him so intimately, who would not have found his face and features as unexpected as we do, imagine for us!

If Jesus is recommending believing rather than seeing the reason is simple: *faith allows us to recognize the Risen Jesus in ways that sight can't.*

Let me add though that belief is not dealing with the purely invisible. Our faith is given things to see, or rather to *feel and experience*, that lead us to recognize the Risen Jesus' presence and action in our lives.

A clue about what these 'things' are can be found in the experience of Mary Magdalen, the disciples, and Thomas related by John's Gospel.

Thomas not only doubted the other disciples' testimony. He went further, declaring that even seeing Jesus's hands and side, as they had done, would not be enough for him. He emphatically declared that nothing less than putting his finger in the mark of the nails and his hands in Jesus' open rib cage would persuade him.

Have you ever wondered why these features of Jesus' physical appearance –his hands and his side– are so prominent in this page of the Gospel?

One obvious answer is that if the mysterious figure that suddenly appeared in their midst really was the same Jesus that had died on the cross, he would bear the marks of his torture. Don't you think though that a God powerful enough to bring Jesus back from the dead could also heal all his wounds? What is so crucial about these marks that they *have* to be the distinctive features of the Risen body?

John tells us that after Jesus' death and before taking his body down from the cross, "one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water" (John 19:34). In Jesus's teaching, blood and water are the signs of the *love* and the *life* he wants to give us.

About the water, Jesus says to the Samaritan woman

Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4:14)

And about the blood:

Whoever ... drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ...Whoever ... drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” (John 6:53-56).

It is on the cross that the real meaning of these words becomes clear: the blood is the symbol of the love that led Jesus to give his life for us, and the water is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, that is the forgiveness and reconciliation with the Father that are the first gifts of the Risen Christ:

“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.”

The disciples believed in the Risen Jesus not because they recognized his earthly physical traits, but because they were touched by what his hands and side meant, that is his love and his forgiveness. They experienced the spring of faith and hope welling up within them, and discovered that from that moment onwards, whether Jesus was present physically or not, he abided in them and they abided in him.

Thomas reaches the same realization when Jesus shows him his hands and his side. Gone is Thomas’ need not only to see, but to verify Jesus’ identity by a physical inspection of the wounds. He too feels the welling up of faith and hope within, is reached by Jesus’ love, and makes one of the most beautiful confessions of faith in the entire New Testament by declaring: “My Lord and my God”.

What makes this confession so poignant is that Thomas is not simply saying “You indeed are God”, but the repetition of “my” – “My Lord and my God” – as if he were saying: “I believe in you not because I see with my eyes or touch with my fingers, but because now I feel you abiding in me, and I abiding in you”. Thomas’ faith did not come from outside, but from within, and quenched once and for all his thirst for meaning, for certainty, and for love.

This is why believing is better, deeper, more effective than seeing.

An apparition of the Risen Jesus in our midst on the altar steps would be of no benefit to us – on the contrary, it would be quite embarrassing, and surely not end up well.

What our celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord’s Day offers to us instead is the same experience the disciples and Thomas made “on the first day of the week” (that is on Sunday too!).

Our own thirst for life and meaning is quenched by Jesus’ water, that is the realization that he abides in us, and that we abide in him, and the certainty that from now on nothing, not even death, will ever separate us from him.

Like the disciples, we too drink Jesus’ blood as we approach for communion and are thus reached in our hearts by the love of the Risen Christ.

Like Thomas, we understand that believing is better than seeing as we are given Jesus’ peace, rejoice in his presence, understand and feel that we are not alone any more, and find ourselves capable, like him, to declare “My Lord and my God”.
