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To See God as God Sees God

Text: St. John 20:19-31

This may well be the season of Easter, but it is, of course, now baseball season as well. Being only a week old it has not yet completely dashed the early hopes of most fans. Even the Nationals after five games are only two games out of first, with one hundred fifty seven more to play. Anything could happen!

As the season begins, let me in its honor tell you the story of a young father who took his four year old son out to his first baseball game. The game was everything that a fan could hope for: both teams got their share of hits, but the pitchers were canny and so strategy came into play every inning, and to top it all off when the home team was two runs behind in the bottom of the ninth inning, they managed to get two men on base when their big hitter strode to bat and gave the ball a mighty whack over the center field fence, winning the game for the hometown team. The father, who took these things very seriously, was emotionally drained at the end, and since his young son had also certainly been excited throughout, he was convinced that not only had he some real quality time with his son, he figured that their relationship would bloom and that they would continue over the years to share a manly love of baseball. However, when they got home, the boy's mother asked him how he had liked the game. The boy enthusiastically replied that he had loved it, and then proceeded to comment in loving and exquisite detail on the exploding scoreboard, the team mascot that danced along the sidelines, and he also proceeded to enumerate exactly how many hotdogs, ice cream sandwiches, sodas, and peanuts he had consumed – as well as the number of beers his father had consumed. He had loved being at the game; unfortunately,

as far as the game proper went, he hadn't seen or understood a thing. What impressed him was everything that went on around the game.

Both a father's naivete about what a four year can comprehend and the four year old's being impressed by purely surface matters are easily understandable. What is unfortunate is when people who ought to know better, ought to know better about what is important and what is not, are impressed only by what is on the surface. In such cases not only do they fail to see what is of real interest, not only do they not see the real game, too often they also start to impress on others the idea that only the surface counts. When that happens content suffers. A whole culture becomes shallow, yawning at the real game, and waking up only for the fireworks, which are surely peripheral. This has perhaps happened already in sports where one can hardly cheer above the rock and roll blasting from loudspeakers; the game itself sometimes seems little more than a sideshow in a much bigger carnival. But it also happens elsewhere, and the examples are numerous.

Take schools as an example. What really ought to be going on in schools, of course, is the broadening and deepening of any student's ability to think the world. For those who have done well at that task, there are, of course, at the end of the term various honors, as well there should be. But sometimes those honors and all the trappings that attend them too often become the sole focus of those involved; then wisdom as a pursuit goes by the boards. Too often, for example, some students will avoid a challenging class or teacher in order to protect a grade point average. One, of course, needs good grades to get into a good college, but if grades, and not wisdom, are what one is ultimately aiming at, what is the point of going to college anyway, except perhaps to cash in on the college's name? To approach learning in that way ironically then means that honors no longer speak to a student's wisdom and depth but to his or her

shallowness. Too often, too, there are faculty who rest on the laurels of the quality of their own college and graduate experience or on whom they know – or, too often, whom they used to know.

Churches are not as different as they would like to think on this score, either. Pews of certain churches are regularly filled with those who are attending simply for aesthetic reasons; the music is good, the liturgy sophisticated and being around all that liturgy and music makes one feel sophisticated, thus substituting a purely aesthetic feeling for what ought to be a religious one. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, there are churches who turn up their noses at the sound of the organ or the scent of any liturgy, including prayers that are written out. They play to the comfort factor of the members, appealing to sentiment and nostalgia. Everybody is “comfortable” here, they say. Comfortable, indeed, but this hardly seems the faith of the early church which the Book of Acts tells us “turned the world upside down.” One could similarly go down the list of community organizations and clubs that for some people mean no more than another impressive line on the resume which they intend to trade off for even more impressive lines further down the road.

The problem in each of these cases is not honors, the aesthetics, or the sense of familiarity and belonging that attend academic work, worship or community work. If scholarship, worship and service are good things, and they are, there ought to be outward and visible signs that they are important, and they ought to be honored among us. It would simply be cynical or sour grapes if we were to dismiss them completely out of hand. It would be churlish not to give honors to people who deserve them. It is a necessary gratitude and sign of respect on our parts. But there really is a problem whenever we attend only to the glitter, and the outward appearances, for whenever we do that, we inevitably fail to see the more important work and

thinking that lies behind the honors, or the goodness and faithfulness from which comes beauty and friendship; we fail to see *what* is really being honored, which often seems much humbler and less exciting. Like the friends of the little red hen, we want and honor the bread when it is baked and ready to be eaten, but unfortunately fail to see that a good deal of the worth of the bread is the effort that went into making it. We see only half, and miss the whole.

There is an ancient Islamic story that tells how Satan fell into his current evil state. Tradition, of course, held that he was the most glorious of the angels before the creation of the earth. In the story the problem came when humans were created. For after Adam, the first human being, was created, God called all the angels of heaven together and commanded them to bow down in front of Adam. Satan alone refused to do so. In one version of the story God confronts the defiant angel thus:

“Why did you not prostrate yourself when I commanded you?” God asked.

“I am nobler than he,” Satan replied. “You created me from fire, but You created him from clay.”

And God said, “Get you down hence! Heaven is no place for your contemptuous pride. Away with you!”

At first appearance, in this version of the story it actually seems that Satan has reason on his side. Why should the better bow down in front of the apparently worse? But a later Islamic sage by the name of Rumi, in a poem telling people how to be good, explains what Satan’s problem is. Rumi advises his reader on how to look at the creation of human beings:

See in everyone’s face a wondrous moon.

When you have seen the beginning, see the end

So that you do not become like Satan, one-eyed.

Half he sees, half not, like some defective.

He saw Adam's clay, but his faith he saw not;

He saw the world in him, but his other-worldly eye he saw not.

In short, Satan wanted to see only what was on the surface, and when it didn't shine, and when it didn't measure up to his own proud self-importance, he failed to see the humbler, and but yet more important center of God's mysterious honoring of a being made of clay. He failed to see in such a humble creature as a human being what God himself actually sees in a human being.

Now, all of this is to bring us to think about this morning's Gospel lesson, the story of Thomas, who, after the Resurrection, misses Jesus' first appearance to his disciples, and who claims after the others tell him that they have seen the risen Lord that he will not believe unless he sees the mark of the nails in Jesus' hand and puts his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in Jesus' pierced side.

Thomas as a result of this claim does not generally enjoy a high reputation in later Christian tradition. In fact, it has earned him the nickname "Doubting Thomas," hardly a resume builder for a would-be saint. Whenever we call somebody a doubting Thomas, we are rarely complimenting that person. Thomas has to see and touch before he believes in mysteries. We all know the type and usually find such people tiresome, for such people seem to expect that the whole world wait on them until they are mentally satisfied, and they inevitably refuse to be satisfied, challenging every little statement, every little detail, insisting that it is not proof enough. And yet, I want to suggest, that Thomas may well be one of the more profound of the disciples, the one who got very quickly beneath the surface. Far from being a person who is only interested in surface matters, Thomas may well be the most discerning of disciples.

Why? Because in a very important sense, he has more faith, or, perhaps better put, because he has the right kind of faith. Thomas is really no more of a sceptic than the other disciples. They, after all, believed only after seeing; Thomas had just been missing the night that the Risen Christ appeared to them. He doesn't seem to be asking for anything more than they had been granted. But what is important about Thomas' faith is that he asks about and is willing to be convinced only by the right kind of evidence. He will not believe unless – unless what? That the Risen Christ appear to him in glory? That the Risen Christ appear in radiance? That the Risen Christ perform some really astounding miracle? No, he will not believe unless the One who confronts him has the nail marks, and the pierced side of the crucified Jesus, unless the glorious resurrected one is the same humiliated, crucified one. When then Thomas finally does see those marks, he doesn't even bother to put his fingers in the holes; he simply and immediately confesses: "My Lord and my God." Just as important is the fact, if we believe tradition, that Thomas later carried the crucified and risen Christ's gospel farther than any other apostle did, for the Christian church in India, the Mar Thoma church, is claimed to have been founded by him. He was also martyred for his efforts. His faith, unlike proud Satan's, was his very ability to look for and to see the humble center of life beneath the surface, to see that the awful nail marks are what is most important, and it was his willingness to go and tell that story to very humble people.

Recently I was reading a book that claimed that a thirst for miracles and the miraculous, a thirst which our age has in abundance, is actually a sign of unbelief, which our age also has in abundance. The point, and it is absolutely correct, is that we are only willing to be convinced by the big, the grandiose, and the glorious. We can't see in humble day to day life itself the very miracle and power of the Creator. We certainly have a hard time, as people always have a hard time, seeing that God also dwells in the despised, the humiliated, the lowly, and the

commonplace – and especially in the nail marks. In that vein, waiting therefore to believe on the glory of the resurrection itself can be a type of unbelief if that means that we aren't convinced chiefly by Jesus' humble sufferings and his care for his everyday brothers and sisters, the very works that he himself claims are the real evidence that he has come from the Father and that he is doing the Father's work.

To believe in the Resurrection is, of course, to believe in the miraculous. But the real miracle, the important one, is not that we are impressed by the light and the seeming overpowering of nature in the glory of the resurrection, as if nothing before had really counted, as if the game hadn't really been played on a much grittier field. The real miracle of the Resurrection is rather that we, humble as we are, made out of clay as we are, have now within us the life and the light of the Resurrection that allows us to be confident enough and willing enough to look at death, to look at the small and humble, to care for what is made of clay with infinite care and devotion, and the ability to see its significance. For the significance of all these lowly things is that it is precisely these lowly things that are resurrected, these are the things that are made eternal, these are what God has loved so much that he gave his only begotten son to die for them. These are the very things that God brings into his kingdom and these things are the content and ingredients of which God's kingdom is made. To believe in the Resurrection and to have Resurrection faith is therefore first and foremost to see the kingdom in the nail marks. And for those who can see it, who can see the real game and not be distracted by the exploding scoreboard, for those who can live this way, there has already been a true resurrection of the Spirit.