Blind Faith and Seeing for Ourselves

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Thank you for inviting me to participate in this service. I have enjoyed seeing Margaret again and meeting Megumi and Allan. Moira and I can go back to Toronto with the report that the people of First Metropolitan are being well-served by their Emmanuel College graduates.

Let us pray:
May my words and our reflections be acceptable in your sight, Creator God, in whom we live and move and have our being.
Amen

One of the main characters in today’s reading from the Gospel of John is Thomas. His name has become associated in our everyday language with doubt - and the association is usually negative. Who likes to be called a doubting Thomas? As Marcus Borg points out, when he was growing up “there was only one thing worse than being a Judas, and that was being a doubting Thomas; he was virtually a villain.”

I am quoting Marcus Borg because you will be hearing more about him as time goes by. He has become a very popular speaker in United Church circles - especially since his book, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, came out in 1994. As Allan reminded you, Joan and Rob are leading a study group on Borg’s new book, The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith.

I agree with Borg’s observation that Thomas’ reputation as a doubter has been a strange development considering what the text actually says. In wanting to see for himself, Thomas was demanding what the rest of the disciples had already experienced. In last week’s passage from John’s Gospel, we learned that when Mary saw Jesus outside of the empty tomb, he gave her a message for the disciples. He said, tell them that I am “ascending to my God and your God.” Vs. 18: “Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord;’ and she told them that he had said these things to her.” However, the disciples did not take her word for it.

In today’s passage we are told that the band of frightened and discouraged followers were hiding behind a locked door when Jesus appeared to them. He showed them his hands and his side, and the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. But Thomas, one of the twelve, had not been with them when Jesus came. He said that he would not believe that Jesus had returned until he had seen him for himself. However, in saying that he wanted to see for himself, he was simply doing what the other disciples had done when they refused to believe Mary’s report that Jesus was alive.
If the story about Thomas isn’t about doubt, what is it about? In my view it is about the difference between blind faith and seeing for ourselves. But seeing is a complex phenomenon. On the one hand, we see physical objects that can be touched and handled. But seeing also has another meaning.

First, let me use a mundane example to illustrate the importance of seeing for one’s self rather than accepting something on blind faith. During the summer before I entered Queen’s Theological College, I took what at that time was called a summer mission field in southern Alberta. I had turned in my company car, and bought a used Volkswagen Beetle. I accepted the dealer’s claim that it was ready to go, and I headed out past Drumheller with all of my worldly goods on board. I had simply assumed that a tire jack would be included in a car that was ready to go. If anyone had asked me, I could have told them exactly what it looked like, and where it was located. However, half way to my summer mission field I had a flat tire. It was only then that I discovered that the used car I had purchased did not in fact have a jack. I should have checked! Like Thomas - and the other disciples - I should have made a point of seeing for myself.

We also use the notion of seeing in a less material or physical way. For example, I can recall what it was like to do math problems in school - especially as the problems became more difficult. By the time I reached fourth year in my engineering studies, there were times when I could apply the rules and get the correct answer without really understanding how the problem was solved. I used to say in frustration to the teacher: I know what you are saying, but I don’t see it!

When we look at the Easter experience from the standpoint of these two ways of seeing, what do we see? Students of Christian origins agree on three basic historical facts. As one of them put it, “There was a movement, the authorities killed the mover, but now it has spread all over the place” (John Dominic Crossan). Marcus Borg presents the same picture. After the death of their leader, Jesus’ followers were discouraged and fearful. However, in the following days and weeks and years they experienced new life; this new life was related to the conviction that Jesus was alive and present; and, the disciples finally “got it” - Jesus, the leader of their movement and the spiritual presence who empowers them to continue the mission he had begun, is the revelation of God.

In books such as Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time and The God We Never Knew, Marcus Borg is referring to both ways of seeing - what are the facts and what do these experiences of new life mean for us in our day? It may sound flippant to say this, but a funny thing happened to Borg on his way to a meeting of biblical scholars. He tells about the time he “was driving to the Portland airport in order to fly twenty-five hundred miles to a meeting of the group of scholars called the Jesus Seminar. The main work of these scholars has been to study the words attributed to Jesus by the Gospel writers. The method they use involves discussing particular passages and then voting on whether or not they think the words were actually said by Jesus. Other scholars tend to make fun of their practice of casting colored balls as their method of voting. A red ball means Jesus said the words, while a black ball means that the passage was added later. Yellow and gray balls fall between.
As he drove to the airport to catch his plane to the next meeting of the Jesus Seminar, Borg was thinking about their next topic. They were going to vote on whether or not they thought that the words of the Lord’s prayer could be traced back to Jesus. He was also reflecting on the fact that about fifty scholars in other parts of the country were also about to board planes for the same purpose.” He then noticed that one of the lead stories on the radio station to which he was listening “was about Jesus - specifically, a report about laboratory tests on the Shroud of Turin, that mysterious piece of cloth that some think was the burial shroud of Jesus.” Finally, he recalls that “three days later, the voting the Jesus Seminar did on the Lord’s Prayer was a front-page story in over two hundred newspapers” (Jesus at 2000, p. 1).

This combination of events prompted Borg to see in a new way that the continuing interest in Jesus after his death 2000 years earlier was nothing short of incredible. During the years of his work with the Jesus Seminar, Borg’s scholarly preoccupation with whether or not Jesus really spoke the words attributed to him in the Gospel narratives was transformed into a renewed personal commitment to Jesus as the revelation of God.

Borg discovered a renewed interest in seeing again what Jesus was like and how he became “the single most important person in the history of Western culture” (Jesus at 2000, p. 2). He met Jesus again for the first time when he recognized the similarities between the experience of the original disciples and the experience of every subsequent generation of Jesus’ followers. Periods of discouragement and defeat are overcome by experiences of new life and new energy to continue the mission. The “Jesus of history” of his scholarly interests became the “Jesus in history” of his renewed Christian faith.

Jesus continues to enter history through the activities of scholars, the curiosity of journalists, and the lives of followers who gather in his name to reflect upon who he is, what he stands for, and what it means in our time and place to be faithful disciples. How is he entering history through our lives? Are we a discouraged remnant which has lost confidence in the mission that inspired earlier generations? Or, do we feel renewed by the presence of the living Jesus who continues to send us out to meet new challenges?

These are serious questions for a church like ours which used to play a much more important role in Canadian society than it now does. In fact it is that formerly dominant role that causes the distress that many now feel. Although we recall with pride our role as social gospel advocates of social programs, medicare and a more open attitude towards members of other religions, there are aspects of our history that cause us pain. For example, what are we to make of the terrible things that are being said about the churches’ involvement in residential schools for Aboriginal children? We are left wondering if the whole effort to spread Christianity to all peoples, and to collaborate with governments in the running of schools, hospitals and social services, rested upon a huge mistake. However, before we draw that conclusion, and settle for the first and discouraging half of the Easter experience, we should look more closely at the challenge posed by the need for a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.
The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which issued its massive report in 1996, both criticized and challenged the churches. On the one hand, the Commissioners called upon the churches to take responsibility for the abuse suffered by Aboriginal children in church-operated residential schools. On the other hand, they pointed out that the churches could make an important contribution to a new relationship between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians. In a recent public lecture in Vancouver, the Co-Chair of the Royal Commission, Georges Erasmus, expressed again the conviction that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples could work together to build a shared future. A new partnership could be based upon a vision for Canada grounded in the beliefs and values of particular traditions.

Erasmus points out that, the Canada that Aboriginal peoples envision would reflect the ideals embedded in Aboriginal languages and traditional teachings. These include: “the spiritual gift of ... long life and well-being which enable a person to gain wisdom; “laws for maintaining peace between peoples;” and “a responsible relationship to the natural order.”

Erasmus assumes that “most Canadians subscribe to these same goals.” We all at least claim to want a long life, health and wisdom for self and family; a harmonious and cohesive society; peace between peoples of different origins and territories; and a sustainable relationship with the natural environment. He assumes that Canadians also agree in principle with “the traditional aboriginal ethic that our actions today should not jeopardize the health, peace and well-being of generations yet unborn.”

We can - in a detached and formal way - agree that these goals represent an accurate account of what Christians ought to believe. But are they convictions that illumine our lives and empower us “to seek justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with our God?” Do we continue to take these beliefs for granted through blind or secondhand faith? Or, have we seen for ourselves the new life experienced by post-Easter Christians. Do we re-experience the reality and vitality of our faith by regularly returning to our roots in the teachings by and about Jesus and venturing out to embrace new challenges?

I encourage you to study the writings of Marcus Borg and other scholars,* and to examine with a group of friends what is said by and about Jesus in the biblical records, but be careful. You too might meet Jesus - and God - again for the first time. You might see for yourselves that in Jesus we really do meet the Creator in whom we live and move and have our being. And it will change your lives.