

Seeing and believing

By [Kenneth H. Carter Jr.](#)

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On Easter Sunday we proclaim the resurrection. But the second Sunday of Easter gives us an opportunity to reflect on the nuances, contradictions and implications of this central event.

The epistle echoes the better-known Gospel ("what we have seen with our eyes...and touched with our hands"). Reading it now, the passage also connects the Easter miracle with the postmodern world: just as the earliest Christian communities needed to relate the truth of the gospel to their own lived experience, so do we in our own time. "We declare to you what we have seen and heard," confesses the epistle, giving us a model for proclamation. Rather than looking beyond ourselves for illustrations and anecdotes, we can search our own lives for parables of death and resurrection and then speak from this experience with confidence.

The Acts reading summarizes the common life shared by those who were witnesses to the resurrection. Echoing Acts 2:42-47, this passage concisely lays out the difference that the revolutionary Jesus makes in the lives of his followers: they sell their possessions and lay the proceeds at the feet of the apostles, who then disburse them to any in need.

After witnessing protestors questioning the monetary policies of the G-20 nations, we might go more deeply into our own tradition: Jesus told the rich young man to sell his possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and follow him. His followers remembered this teaching and were called to retain this practice. Perhaps the most faithful response to the current recession might be to embrace radical simplicity, with its relinquishment of material comforts, in order that we might become more generous. While relinquishment might ultimately mean a kind of death, in generosity there is surely resurrection.

The Gospel lection is the most integrally related to the proclamation of Easter Sunday, since it functions almost as "the rest of the story." Thomas was not among those who witnessed the risen Lord. "Were you there when the crucified my Lord?" the others ask Thomas.

"No," he replies, "I wasn't."

"Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?"

"Well, no."

Thomas needs to experience the resurrection. He can't take Peter's word for it, or James's or John's or anyone else's—he wants to see for himself. The gospel is not something that we can impose on others. People must discover it for themselves, like a treasure hidden in a field. We cannot live off the experiences of others, drawing down the spiritual capital of the past.

Thankfully, the disciples allow Thomas his quest. History has referred to him as Doubting Thomas, but in his skepticism he represents all of us who come to faith and continue in it with perseverance and struggle. Thomas is a seeker, someone in extended conversation with Jesus about the faith (see John 14). That faith includes struggle and doubt. Here two of our readings exist in tension: while the Gospel blesses those who have not seen and yet believe, the epistle gives voice to those who have seen with their eyes and touched with their hands.