

# **April 19, Easter 2A (John 20:19-31; 1 Peter 1:3-9)**

## **There's more than one way to taste and see the goodness of God.**

by [Laurel Mathewson](#) in the [April 8, 2020](#) issue

A deacon in our diocese told me that he's never had an overtly spiritual experience that grounds his Christian faith. "I have a friend who worries about my salvation because of it," he said, laughing. "He asks me every time I see him: 'Have you been zapped yet?'"

Now, a lack of zapping has not prevented this deacon from devoting his life to the proclamation of the gospel, seeking justice in his work, and raising up servant leaders within the church. He trusts and proclaims the essence of the ancient creeds with joy, his bass voice booming "Alleluia! Alleluia!" with each dismissal, though he has not seen the Lord in any identifiable fashion. The words of 1 Peter could describe him and countless others: "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy."

"Blessed are those who have not seen," Jesus says in John, "and yet have come to believe." Where does such faith come from? How does it work?

Our lectionary texts bring before us the reality of faith without seeing. And in 1 Peter especially, the public questioning of just such unseeing faith looms large. This is perhaps the epistle most keenly aware of a doubting and hostile social context for those who trust in salvation through the one they have not seen. It is full of reminders of the goodness of the unexpected and incorruptible inheritance the audience has received from the creator of the universe through the grace of Christ Jesus, because they likely need reminding. They are widows and slaves, women married to men who think this whole Christian thing is ridiculous, people of every age surrounded by irritated gentiles, and they need the famous defensive pep talk of

a later passage in the letter (3:15).

In San Diego (where I live) and other predominantly secular landscapes of our age, Christians face no real political persecution but still might benefit from pondering their own witness to “an indescribable and glorious joy.” Recently I felt underwhelmed by my own defense when the trainer of my group fitness class found out I was an Episcopal priest and quickly asked, with unmasked disdain, “Why would you do that?” I vaguely addressed the vocational fit of the job but said nothing about hope, let alone glorious joy. I know I could have done better, but I also know these challenges of translating and proclaiming faith in a confused and skeptical world are as old as the resurrection. Early Christians in Asia Minor couldn’t say, “I have seen Jesus, face to face! I have felt the wounds in his hands!” any more than I can.

What I have known, however, is glorious joy in the life of faith.

Whether we see this Christ or not, he is the one drawing us all along into this trust of unfathomable forgiveness, this joy in God’s ultimate power over death, this hope in his way of humility and mercy. As 1 Peter goes on to say, it is “through him you have come to trust in God” (1:21). Maybe that’s part of why unseeing faith can be just as steadfast as the witness of Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene—can be part of how it works, how we are blessed and strengthened by the Spirit of Christ as we lean into the promises and wisdom of the central apostolic teachings. There is no special class of evangelists, then: we are empowered to give some account of our trust in God, our faith in what we have come to believe irrespective of whether we have seen or not seen, been zapped or remain unzapped. Maybe it’s as simple as the deacon’s witness to me: “I believe because over the years my gut and my heart and my head have come to agree that it’s true, and it’s the best way for me and humanity.” My Lord and my God.

I think about this as I work on a book about my own journey of faith in conversation with Teresa of Ávila, who wrote *The Interior Castle* for those who had come to know firsthand that “God was in them and they were in God,” as well as for readers who had never received such extraordinary gifts in prayer—and some who resolutely didn’t want to. For nearly three decades, I lived as a seriously doubting Thomas figure within the church. (When a seminary classmate wrote on the whiteboard “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” I anonymously scrawled underneath, “Where?”) Then, in a series of prayer experiences spanning many years, Christ Jesus came to me with an intimacy and power that I, like Thomas, could

not deny. I've looked at faith and love from both sides now: what could be simplistically parsed into seeing and unseeing faith.

But Teresa, and the best of the Christian tradition, will never let us make this rude division. For her, it is all part of one journey toward a unity with the God at the center, a journey not defined by any extraordinary experience. This emphasis is in 1 Peter as well: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (2:2-3). As the early church already knew, there are many ways of tasting, glimpsing, and seeing the goodness of the Lord. And God will give us the sort of food we need to do the work we must.