

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

I was hiking on a trail next to Patrick McMillan, whom you may know as the host of "Expeditions" on SC public television. Approaching us on the trail was a young couple; they were holding hands while enjoying their day of young love together in this beautiful setting. Patrick stopped walking once he noticed the couple heading our way. He leaned over to me with a smirk on his face and quietly said, "Watch this." He hollered to the couple, who were

about 30 feet away from us, “Do you mind stopping right there.” With a puzzled look on their faces, and not even knowing who Patrick is, they obliged. “Okay, now take two steps forward,” which they did, “and take a deep breath.”

They take that deep breath, and suddenly they let go of each other’s hand and quickly mask their faces. “Ugh! What is that!?” they shout out, turning shades of green and quickly moving away from that position. “Sorry to bother you with that!” Patrick yelled with a smile. “Stick around if you want to learn about the plant that is the source of that smell.” We were at the South Carolina Botanical Garden in Clemson, of which Patrick is the director. I was taking part in a class that day about native plants that he was teaching.

The plant that Patrick was referring to is not native to this continent, but I can tell he still has a lot of fun with it when it is in bloom. It is called the Corpse Flower, which is a dead giveaway for what it smells like. It is a smell – as well as a sight – to behold. The flower of this plant is huge, sometimes growing to nine feet tall. The natural history behind the plant is fascinating.

Long ago all terrestrial plants were pollinated by wind. If you’ve ever been in South Carolina during the months of February and March, you know that some plants still use wind pollination, which sends pollen everywhere. This method isn’t a very efficient use of the plant’s resources and energy. So some plants developed ways to convince animals to do the pollinating for them. You likely know how some plants provide nectar for bees to eat, and during that process pollen is attached to the bees to be taken to other flowers. Other plants focus on having hummingbirds do their pollinating. Or wasps. Or beetles. Or moths. You name it; plants tend to focus on a specific type of animal, which is a far more efficient use of their resources.

The Corpse Flower figured out that the more it produces a smell with the same chemical compounds that a dead animal releases, the more likely it will attract... flies. The Corpse Flower is also one of the few species in the plant kingdom that is able to increase its own temperature. When in bloom, the flower structure can get up to 10°C hotter than the surrounding air. Scientists think it does this in order to convince flies and other carrion-eating insects that they are getting a fresh meal. The more insects the plant attracts, the more likely it will reproduce. Imagine that: through the generations this plant has figured out and taken advantage of some of the most unpleasant realities of death.

Humanity, also through the generations, has come to know these unpleasant aspects as well. I won’t enumerate them all here. Let it suffice, though, that foremost among the

lessons that humanity has learned is that dead people remain dead. The disciples of Jesus had witnessed the events of Friday and they knew he was dead-dead. Everything in nature and in human history taught them to know that the story had come to its inevitable conclusion then and there. Now, some of the women on that Sunday morning told them a different story, but the disciples didn't believe them until Jesus appeared.

I'm sure that once Jesus arrived, they were in awe. Not just in seeing their teacher once again, but in awe that somehow a fundamental rule of the universe had been broken: dead people are supposed to remain dead. It was apparently a "You had to see it to believe it" moment, because Thomas wasn't there and he couldn't believe the story his friends were sharing. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

According to Cognitive Dissonance Theory in the field of Psychology, brains have the tendency to seek consistency with our beliefs, our opinions, and our views of the world. When an inconsistency is introduced, it is called dissonance. Our brains will try to find something to change in order to eliminate the dissonance. That could involve changing one's mind to incorporate the new idea, but often the dissonance is eliminated by attempting to discredit the new reality or by mentally undermining the messenger. Thomas knew that in the reality in which he lived there was a fundamental rule: dead people remain dead. This story his friends were telling of a resurrected Jesus was dissonance.

I'd like to tell you a story. There were two friends in a rural community named Bill and Hal. Bill was making the investment of starting a diner, and one day shortly before the opening, Hal had an idea. Hal had a pond on his farm that was right behind his house. The frogs there croaked all night; it was such a racket that it was hard for Hal to sleep. There must have been thousands. Hal approached Bill with a deal: if Bill bought the cages to catch all the frogs at the pond, Hal would do the trapping and deliver them to Bill to make frog legs for the diner. Bill agreed, and he began to include on his grand-opening advertisements that his diner would have the best frog legs in town.

Bill purchased the cages for Hal and all was good, except that Hal didn't show up with his first delivery of frogs that were supposed to arrive a couple days before the diner's opening. Bill called, to hear Hal say, "I can't talk now! I'm too busy catching frogs!" Bill thought that was a good sign, so he gave Hal a pass. But still, Hal never showed up with frogs. Bill called again the next day; "I can't talk now, Bill! I'm too busy catching frogs!" Once again, no frogs were delivered. Finally, on the day of the diner's opening, Bill drove

over to Hal's place to get those frogs. He approached the pond to discover the dozens of frog cages he had purchased, but they were all empty except one. One cage had five frogs in it. Now that one cage was making a tremendous racket with all its croaking, but Bill noticed that the rest of the pond was completely silent. He saw Hal crouched near the pond's edge. "Hal, what are you doing?!" "I can't talk now, Bill! I'm too busy catching frogs."

Hal was convinced his pond had thousands of frogs. That was the only reality he understood. It didn't matter if it were revealed that there were only five frogs to be found; the thousands of other frogs had to be there somewhere. Hal had cognitive dissonance. He couldn't accept this new reality with the old, and his mind told him to disbelieve the new reality.

Getting back to Thomas: he had cognitive dissonance. The old reality told him that dead people remain dead. But one week later, Jesus arrives again, encounters Thomas, who falls down and cries, "My Lord and my God!" Unlike Hal, Thomas is able to accept this new reality once he is able to see it for himself.

As Christians, our proclamation is of a new reality that God allows to break into the old. Christ's resurrection was the first instance of it, but glimpses have continued to break into our current reality: times when human propensity for evil and hate has not had the final word, times when someone's insurmountable grief has been met by a glimpse of hope, times when a vision of a better world has inspired people to make this world more just. The new reality we proclaim is not easily accepted, possibly even by ourselves. That's because the old reality still surrounds us all. The stench of death still clings to this world. Yet we cling to the hope we are given: that God has the final word, not sin, not humanity's violence, not death.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," it is a blessing to us who have not seen yet we cling to that hope. We allow the vision of the new reality to shape our lives now. We do not deny our current reality and its unpleasant aspects of death, but we hold on to a hope to carry us through that. Cling to this hope; allow the vision of the new reality to shape your life today. That is the faith that is blessed by Jesus Christ himself.

Thanks be to God. Amen.