

There are lots of movies about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and each year the cable and broadcast channels are continually running these films through Easter, but there are very few movies about the post-resurrection appearances of Christ. However, several years ago a new film was released titled “Risen.” Have any of you seen it? Risen is an extremely high quality and well-produced film starring Joseph Fiennes and Tom Felton from the Harry Potter series, focusing on that somewhat mysterious time between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension.

Fiennes plays the character of Clavius, a Centurion and captain of the Roman squad that crucified Christ. Although Clavius is obviously a fictional character, the movie is very accurate in its depiction of the confusion and fear on the part of both Pilate and the chief priests of the temple in the days immediately following the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. The Roman governor, at the behest of the Temple authorities, charges Clavius with the task of quelling the rumors of Jesus’ resurrection. Pilate commands that Clavius bring him the body of Jesus, and once the body is found, he orders the captain to slaughter all of Jesus’ followers.

Clavius obeys his orders with great zeal, digging up the already decomposed bodies of crucified criminals, interviewing the two guards posted at the tomb, and finally finding the small group of Jesus’ followers huddled in a village dwelling; but to his astonishment and great puzzlement the Roman captain also finds Christ there with them, and he simply does not know how to handle it. Clavius’ quest transforms from a search for a dead body to a search for understanding. As the apostles slowly accept Clavius into their company, he learns that they are just as astonished and perplexed as he is, and as he travels with them to

meet Jesus in Galilee, he becomes their protector, because he desires, more than anything, to talk to the risen Christ face-to-face, to the one he saw die on the cross at his hands.

Although the film is a fiction, it is entirely accurate in regards to the difficulty of Jesus' followers as they tried to come to grips with his resurrection. Throughout the post-resurrection appearances in the gospels, there is an attitude among the disciples of disbelief, cynicism, and even ridicule toward those who are claiming that Christ has risen. When the women tell the apostles the wonderful, incomprehensible news on the morning of the third day, the gospels tell us that their news was received as idle, hysterical talk. Even after many weeks following his resurrection, as Jesus is leading his followers to the place from which he will ascend, the book of Acts tells us that "some doubted." But it is only in the gospel of John that we hear Jesus respond to the doubters, not only among his own followers, but for all people for all time.

The one to whom Jesus responds in John's gospel is the apostle named Thomas. We know little of Thomas beyond his brief appearances in the New Testament, but even from those appearances we can see that Thomas is both a realist and a fatalist. Thomas is the type of person described so aptly by Leo Tolstoy in his book, "The Kingdom of God is Within You": "The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him."

When Jesus announces that he is going to Jerusalem despite the danger from the temple leadership, Thomas somewhat cynically declares, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus sits at table at the Passover feast before his arrest, he tells his apostles

that they know the way to where he is going. Thomas rather boldly replies, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way.” Thomas is not asking for spiritual insight – he is demanding certainty, a literal roadmap. But it is in Jesus’ second post-resurrection appearance to the disciples where Thomas’s demand for certainty is finally answered by Christ himself and, as typical of Christ, it is an answer for all of us.

The apostles who have seen Jesus at his first appearance accept that their teacher has truly risen as God’s promised Messiah, but when Thomas is given this news, his response is consistent with his realistic nature – he will not believe until he actually touches the crucifixion wounds with his own hands. Comedian and well-known atheist, the late George Carlin, once mocked believers with these words: “Tell people there’s an invisible man in the sky who created the universe, and the vast majority will believe you. Tell them the paint is wet, and they have to touch it to be sure.” Jesus understands the George Carlins of the world, and he knows that Thomas is demanding to figuratively “touch the paint” of the resurrected Christ.

When Jesus appears for the second time in Thomas presence he invites Thomas to satisfy his doubt: “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” What John does not tell us is whether Thomas actually accepted the risen Christ’s invitation. All we hear is Thomas’ response to Jesus’ challenge: “My Lord and my God.” It is a statement of faith, but it is the faith of the old age of religion. In the old age of faith, the gods were represented by little idols that could be held or placed in the homes of believers. In the old age, those who believed in the one God had to appease that one God by killing living things on the altar of sacrifice. In the old age, God’s pleasure or displeasure was measured by the quality of one’s life.

Christ sets aside the old age of faith by summarizing what his resurrection represents in the new age of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” We are all familiar with the old saying, “Seeing is believing,” yet we know that this maxim is not always true. In 1966 Time magazine shocked the nation with a cover that featured a black background with a question asked in large, white lettering – “Is God Dead?” Do any of you remember that? Just last week Time reproduced that exact same cover, but this time it replaced one word: “Is Truth Dead?” The first cover was questioning spiritual reality; the one was last week was questioning political reality.

Jesus, on the other hand, turns all reality on its head when he declares that seeing is not believing. How can we make sense of Christ’s words? Let’s take a moment to think again about Thomas and his brother and sister disciples. When they saw the risen Christ in the weeks following his resurrection, they believed that he had risen, but not understand what the resurrection meant. Jesus promises that they will understand when the age of the Holy Spirit is manifested at Pentecost. After Christ’s ascension, the apostles and many other followers of Christ do what Jesus had told them – they gather with faith and await an answer to all of their bewilderment and confusion. After Pentecost, that band of followers, apostles and disciples, become the church, and their lives are changed from one of hearing to one of showing the reality of the living Christ to all the world.

The transformation at Pentecost still describes the church today, and makes sense of the idea that seeing is not believing. In the age of the Holy Spirit, seeing is not believing; believing is seeing. Listen to that again – believing is seeing. And what do believers see? We see the creative power of God in the wonder of the universe and the miracle of life; we

see the value of every human being, and in doing so we lift up love over judgment. In believing, we see the ultimate purpose of our lives – to glorify God as we humble ourselves, to seek Christ’s grace, and to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us to places where Christ’s love is needed, which is anywhere that people suffer, bleed, hunger, despair, or reach out for comfort and hope.

In reflecting upon her own doubts, Presbyterian author Anne Lamott wrote these words: “I have a lot of faith. But I am also afraid a lot, and have no real certainty about anything. I remembered something [my friend] Father Tom had told me--that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns.”

Lamott’s words reflect the joyous reality at the heart of the resurrection – not seeing is believing, and believing is seeing ourselves and world around us through the eyes of Christ’s astonishing, unconditional, overflowing and eternal love; it changes our perspective; it changes the point of life itself. Clavius no longer has to search; Thomas no longer has to have certainty; we no longer have “to touch the paint” to know that the message is true, authentic, and reliable – Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.