Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)

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April 12, 2026 by Steve Brandon

Seeing and Believing

John 20:19-29

1. The Disciples See Jesus (verses 19-23).
2. The Doubter Sees Jesus (verses 24-29).

I am sure that many of you have followed the Artemis II mission that flew around the moon this past week. I know that the Pattons are very familiar with this event! They have followed it closely. The girls purchased a rocket, which they hoped to launch last week after church, but technical difficulties delayed the launch. They plan on launching it after church this morning, though weather may delay it as well. If all goes well, I encourage you all to join in their joy and watch their rocket launch today.

The crew consisted of four astronauts: Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, Christina Koch, and Jeremy Hansen. The rocket launched from Kennedy Space Center on April 1 at 6:35pm Eastern Time. The first day was spent in high Earth orbit, which allowed time to test the critical onboard systems, such as life support, communication, and navigation. When all of the systems checked out, the spacecraft fired its rockets to depart Earth's orbit, sending it toward the moon on a free-return trajectory, which means it would head toward the moon and the moon's gravitation would send it back to Earth. On April 7th, flight day 6, they passed behind the moon, where they experienced a planned loss of signal for 40 minutes, when there was no line of sight between the spacecraft and the Earth. On April 10th, this past Friday evening, they re-entered the Earth's atmosphere and splashed down in the Pacific Ocean at 5:07pm Pacific Time. The U.S. Navy recovered the crew. All in all, it was an amazing mission, yet another step in establishing a sustained human presence on the moon.

Well, this morning as we come to the Scriptures, we are going to see something even more amazing than the Artemis II mission. We will see the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples! I say it is more amazing because the human race has placed rockets in space, men have walked on the moon, and we have robots on Mars. But the human race has never been able to raise people from the dead. Now,

there have been some raised from the dead. Elijah raised some. Elisha raised some. Jesus raised some from the dead, and he himself rose from the dead. But that is exactly the point. It takes God, it takes divine intervention, to do what we humans simply cannot do.

We read about this in John, chapter 20. If you haven't done so already, I invite you to open your Bibles to John, chapter 20. Last week we looked at John 20:1-18, in which we read about the empty tomb and Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene. I think it would be helpful for us to read it again:

> John 20:1-18
> Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.
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> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my

> Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her.

This passage tells us of how the disciples were confused at the empty tomb and how Mary saw the risen Jesus and believed that it was really him.

My message this morning is entitled “Seeing and Believing,” because that is what Mary experienced, and it is what the disciples will experience in our text as well. They will see the Lord, and will believed that he had risen from the dead. We see this in our text: John 20:19-29.

1. The Disciples See Jesus (verses 19-23).

Let’s read verse 19.

> John 20:19
> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Picture the scene. It was the “evening of that day,” that is, Sunday night. The disciples were together in a room, with the doors locked. I suspect it was not merely a dead bolt or a chain securing the door. More likely there was a bar placed across the door, or something heavy placed in front of it to prevent entry. I say this because of the next phrase: the doors were locked “for fear of the Jews.”

I remember talking with a woman who was sharing her experience when her husband would leave on a business trip. She was fearful of being at home alone, especially at night. When bedtime came, her habit was to lock the doors and move the couch in front of the door. It gave her that extra security in her fear of the night without her husband. This is what I think is going on here. The disciples of Jesus are scared. They are fearful of the Jews, afraid they would find them in the room and take them away, perhaps crucify them as they had done to Jesus.

I suspect they were probably quiet in that room. This was not a raucous after-church gathering. They were gathered in hushed, fearful silence. I can picture the many Christians in foreign lands who meet behind closed doors for fear of the authorities. I have heard of Chinese Christians gathering in homes for worship, singing songs in whispers, lest others hear them and report them. These disciples

of Jesus were gathered together for safety, trying to figure out what comes next in their lives. Their leader had just been crucified. They did not know what to do. They were like Jehoshaphat, who prayed to God, “We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you” (2 Chronicles 20:12).

In their gathering, Jesus shows up.

> John 20:19b
> Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

John seems to allude here to a miraculous appearance, as if Jesus in his resurrected state could even pass through walls. In chapter 14, when Jesus was giving his final instructions to the disciples, he told them, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18). Little did they think that Jesus would simply appear to them behind locked doors.

In Luke’s account of this very moment, he says these disciples were “startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit” (Luke 24:37). Of course, Jesus was not a spirit. Luke tells us that Jesus welcomed them to touch him: “Touch me, and see. A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). John provides a bit less detail.

> John 20:20a
> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.

Jesus showed them that he was real. They were not hallucinating. He proved that he was the same person who had been walking with them for three years. His wounds were the same ones he had received upon the cross.

> John 20:20b
> Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

A happiness and a joy filled their souls. It is totally understandable.

The first message that Jesus gave them was “Peace be with you,” spoken in verse 19 and again in verse 21. This was the common greeting of the day. When Jews would see each other in the marketplace, they would say, “Shalom,” which means “Peace” (it is like our “Hello”). Yet in light of John’s gospel and the context here in this room full of frightened disciples, I believe this carries more than a greeting. I do not think Jesus is simply saying, “Hey guys, it’s me!” I believe he is actually

giving them peace with these words.

When Jesus was leaving them, he promised to give them peace: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). This is what Jesus is doing at this moment. He is giving them the peace they need in their confusion, their anxiety, and their apprehension about the future. Jesus calms their soul.

There is low-hanging fruit here for application. Whenever you are fearful or confused or anxious about anything, seek the Lord. He can and will give you peace. Consider Paul's words.

> Philippians 4:6-7
> Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When you are anxious about the future, seek the Lord. When you are anxious about your health, seek the Lord. When you are anxious about finances, seek the Lord. When you are anxious about decisions you face, seek the Lord. When you are anxious about the things you cannot control, seek the Lord. The promise of God is that he will give you peace. A peace that steadies you. A peace that settles you. A peace that sustains you. These disciples needed such a peace.

Then Jesus commissions them.

> John 20:21
> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

This is nothing new for the disciples. In John 17, they had heard Jesus pray to his heavenly Father, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). This is John’s version of the Great Commission. Matthew’s gospel ends with similar words, which Jesus said to the disciples in a different setting:

> Matthew 28:18-20
> “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all

> that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

This is what Jesus told the disciples to do, and this is what we are called to do as well. We are called to make disciples: to be in the world, telling others of Jesus, and when they believe in him, teaching them about Jesus and helping them in the way of obedience. This is what we are doing here as a church. You all have come from the world, you have believed in Jesus, and we as a church gather regularly to be taught and encouraged, that we all might go out and speak about Jesus with those within our reach, at home, at work, in our neighborhoods.

We are not here simply to enjoy ourselves in sweet fellowship. Yes, the fellowship is sweet. Yes, we are encouraged by our gathering. But it is not "Us four, no more, close the door." Our news is so great that we must go out and speak with others. The simple question I ask you is this: are you doing this? Do you have the sense that Jesus is sending you into the world as his ambassador? Do you have friendships with people in the world? Are you speaking to others about Jesus? This is our call as a church.

What I love here in this text is that Jesus gives us what we need to do the task. Look at verse 22.

> John 20:22
> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This was, if you will, a Pentecost for the disciples. They received the Holy Spirit for the first time. Before Jesus left them, he had promised to send the Holy Spirit: "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7). Jesus has gone to the cross, and now he is sending the Holy Spirit to the disciples by breathing on them. I would have loved to see the scene: Jesus breathing, and the Spirit coming.

This is reminiscent of the original creation, when God took the dust of the ground and breathed into the nostrils of Adam the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). Jesus here is breathing spiritual life into the souls of the disciples. By any measure, this changed them. On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was given in fuller measure, Peter was empowered by the Spirit to boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus to all who had gathered for the Jewish feast, and 3,000 were saved from their sins

on that day. A few days later, Peter was again filled with the Holy Spirit, preached again, and was arrested. He declared in Acts 4:12, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

Tradition holds that all of the twelve disciples were martyred, except for Judas, who had betrayed Jesus, and John, who spent his years in exile for preaching Christ. That is far different from where we found them in John 20: locked in a room and scared. This same Spirit will change you as well, if you but believe and seek the Lord. If you are having difficulty speaking with other people about Jesus, pray. Pray for the Spirit to come and fill you afresh. Ask God to empower you to go and speak as he empowered these disciples.

Then comes verse 23. It is really a promise to the disciples.

> John 20:23
> “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Some have taken these words to believe that the power to forgive sins was given to the apostles and passed on through the laying on of hands to the current priests of the Roman Catholic Church. I do not believe this to be the case. Only God can forgive sins.

But let us not back away from the promise Jesus gives these men. He said essentially the same thing twice in Matthew’s gospel: “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19; 18:18). In both contexts, it is talking about the authority and power of the church. In the first case, in Matthew 16, Jesus is promising to build his church, giving to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which I believe were used on the day of Pentecost, when Peter preached and the kingdom of God was swung wide open and 3,000 repented of their sins and believed in Jesus. When the crowd was convicted of their sins at the preaching of Peter, they cried out, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Here is Peter granting forgiveness to all who repent of their sins! This is exactly the authority that was given to Peter. This is exactly the authority that is given to us today. We have the power to forgive sin in that we have the power to tell others how their sins can be forgiven, through faith in Jesus. I say this with full confidence on the

authority of Christ: if you repent of your sins, and if you believe in Jesus, and if you confess him as Lord of your life, you will be forgiven of your sins.

The second part of verse 23 says.

> John 20:23b
> "if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

The second passage in Matthew sheds light on this. Again, it is in the context of church discipline. In Matthew 18, Jesus lays out a scenario of a sinning brother who is confronted by one, then by several, then by the entire church, and yet remains unrepentant. For that one, it can rightly be said that forgiveness of sins is withheld, because they have not repented of their sin, which is needed for the forgiveness of sins. The church of Christ is the mechanism by which the heavenly realities are made visible to all, as they treat the unrepentant one as a tax collector and sinner, in need of faith for forgiveness.

That is the best way to take verse 23. The path to the kingdom of heaven comes through the gospel, which is the business of the church. We preach and teach the path of forgiveness through faith in Jesus. Those who believe are forgiven. Those who fail to believe are not forgiven. May today find you believing, that your sins may be forgiven and that you may have life in the name of Jesus.

2. The Doubter Sees Jesus (verses 24-29).

This is the story of doubting Thomas, and it is filled with encouragement for us. Before we dig into these verses, I want to return to the Artemis II mission for a moment. One of the things that crossed my mind this week was to think about how those who believe the earth is flat were processing this mission. The rocket blasted off for all to see. Pictures and videos were taken of the earth and the moon, here and far away. You can clearly see the shape of the earth. So I did a little digging and watched a video of some men who are steadfast in their belief that the earth is flat, watching the launch of the spacecraft.[1]

All they could do was criticize the event. They found great joy in the fact that the launch date was April 1st, almost as if NASA was winking at us the entire time: "This is fake! You should know this is a giant April Fools Day joke!" They criticized everything. Why are we doing this now? Because it's America 250! Why has the news coverage been so little? How much oxygen and nitrogen are

you bringing? How are you traveling through the Van Allen belts? Look at the number of edits on the NASA video! Look, the video is glitching! How do you explain those video shots? Why aren't they showing video of the crew? Where's the telemetry? Do you know why NASA spends so much time in the schools, teaching children about space? They want to catch them while they are young! "How many globers will there be tomorrow, saying, 'Look man, we're on our way to the moon!'" All of this is absolutely fake!

In some regards, this is Thomas. He did not believe the testimony of the disciples. We see this beginning in verse 24.

> John 20:24-25
> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

In many ways, the flat earthers are just like him. They do not believe in a round earth. They need undeniable proof on their own terms. They are the ones who set the standard for their proof. Note the condition that Thomas sets on his faith: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." This is the core issue with Thomas. He is the one setting the conditions of his faith. He is the one determining what will finally convince him. He is not unlike the many who say something to this effect: "I don't believe in God. The only way that I will believe is if God brings a lightning bolt right now and strikes this tree. I'll give him five seconds. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. See! God doesn't exist!" Such an attitude is foolish. Such was the attitude of Thomas.

Now, I do not think that doubt is all bad. Doubt is natural for us. God has created a world in which he is mysterious. He has not given full proof of his existence. God could have created a world such that he was obvious. He could have created a world in which his voice from the heavens gives a morning announcement every day. He could have let his heavenly throne be seen with the naked eye. He could have made the world in such a way that he is visible to everyone on earth and speaks with them audibly, granting a request or two every day to prove his reality. But God has not created such a world. This is by design, because he wants us to come to him by faith.

This is why, I believe, doubt is not necessarily bad. Read the Psalms. They are filled with doubters. Take Psalm 73. Asaph is struggling. Is God really good to Israel? He sees the wicked prospering, and yet he knows the promise of God that the wicked will be crushed and the righteous will prosper. But he is not seeing that. He almost went to the dark side. He was nearly going to abandon the faith entirely. But then he came into the sanctuary of God, and there he saw reality. God is in his place. And it changed him drastically.

The doubt of the Psalmists is not permanent. They plead with God to remove their doubt. They long and thirst for God to be real in their hearts. Read Psalm 77 or Psalm 88. They are in pure despair. I don't think that is sin. I think it is sin if you want to stay there and harden your heart. But to cry out, "I believe; help my unbelief." To acknowledge your unbelief and pray, that is entirely right. God wants us to be real with him.

The Psalmists long and thirst for God to be real in their hearts, always finding that "but God" moment, where they speak reality to themselves, praying their way out of the doubt. That is proper. But they never press conditions upon what will make them believe, as Thomas did: "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

In God's grace, Jesus did exactly what Thomas had demanded.

> John 20:26
> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Eight days later places this on the following Monday. Again, Jesus appears to them even though the doors were locked. Again, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." This is now the third time Jesus has spoken these words (verses 19 and 21).

Think about that. He had already given them peace. He had already given them the Spirit. And yet the anxiety had crept back in. Peace is not a once-for-all experience. It sneaks back. The battle returns. These disciples needed peace again, and Jesus gave it again. Do not think that the peace of God is some magic that you receive once and then you are done worrying. It is a daily fight. Keep praying. Keep seeking the Lord. "Do not be anxious about anything" is not a one-time prayer but a constant posture before God. Then he addresses Thomas directly.

John 20:27
Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

This is the lightning flash upon the tree moment for Thomas. What he demanded, he received! What an amazing thing. What a gracious thing Jesus did for him. He invited Thomas to see his hands. He invited Thomas to touch his side. He invited Thomas to believe. Seeing, Thomas believed.

John 20:28
Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”

This was his profession of faith. He called Jesus his Lord. He called Jesus his God. Can you say this of Jesus? Is Jesus your Lord? Is Jesus your God? This is the essence of faith, the essence of Christianity: that we believe that Jesus is the sovereign Lord of all, that he is indeed God become flesh. If you believe this single miracle, your life will never be the same. You will know forgiveness of sins. You will experience true life. You will know the way in which you should walk.

Now, you might say, “Steve, that’s all well and good, but I wish I were Thomas. I wish I were the disciples who were privileged to see Jesus. I wish I were Mary, who saw Jesus in the garden. I wish that I could see, that I might believe.” Jesus feels for you. That is why he said to Thomas.

John 20:29
“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

None of us have seen the risen Christ. But if you believe in him regardless, Jesus considers you to be blessed.

Think of it this way. We did not get to go into space with those four astronauts. We did not experience floating in zero gravity and seeing the earth from the far side of the moon. But we can rejoice with them. We can rejoice at what they experienced and what they saw. We believe their testimony.

In the same way, we were not with Mary in the garden. We were not with the disciples in that upper room. We were not Thomas, touching the wounds. But we

believe their testimony. And Jesus says that if that is your faith, you are blessed.

So do not think in any way this morning that you are less privileged than Mary or Thomas or the disciples. In some regards, Jesus tells us that the greater blessing comes upon us who have never seen Jesus risen from the dead yet still believe the testimony of Mary, who said, “I have seen the Lord,” and of the disciples, who said, “We have seen the Lord,” and of Thomas, who, having seen Jesus, cried out, “My Lord and my God!” You will be blessed in many ways.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 12, 2026 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

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[1] Here is the video that I watched of the flat earthers responding to the Artemis II launch: http://youtu.be/I3NZRzReXoc.