

Seeing Isn't Believing

Summary

When we cannot see the future clearly, we are challenged to make a leap of faith. But Jesus will support us when we believe his words and trust his instructions.

The fifth installment of the Indiana Jones series is scheduled to hit theaters this year, more than four decades after the original installment, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, was released in 1981. While we are waiting, we could do worse than go back to the third chapter in the series, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

In this movie, the swashbuckling archaeologist Indiana Jones faces three challenges. The first is a deadly decapitating blade that he avoids by falling to his knees in humility. The second is a kind of life-or-death hopscotch puzzle that he conquers by stepping only on the letters of God's name. The third challenge is an enormous canyon, one that seems to create an impossible gulf between Indiana and his treasure: The Holy Grail.

The canyon is too wide to jump, and too deep to hike down and through. Indiana is standing on the edge of the cliff, wondering what in the world he is going to do, when all of a sudden, he hears his father's voice encouraging him to make a leap of faith. He resists at first, sensible man that he is, but then realizes that he has no other choice. He closes his eyes and steps into the canyon. Miraculously, he doesn't fall. He is held up by a narrow bridge that had been invisible to his eyes — a bridge that he couldn't see, but that he believed would be there to hold him up.

Does Indiana find the Holy Grail? Those of you who have seen the movie know, and those of you who haven't watched it will just have to check it out. Suffice it to say that his leap of faith pays off, and he is able to cross the canyon and reach his destination.

Seeing is believing

In most of our daily activities, we live by the old saying, "seeing is believing." If someone says that they want to sell you a classic automobile with low mileage and a perfect finish, you would want to take a look at the car before you hand over any money. If a group of college students offers to paint your house over the summer, you would do well to inspect some of their previous work before signing a contract. If a friend offers to arrange a blind date for you, with a very attractive, perfectly charming person... well, you'd be wise not to get your hopes too high. Seeing is believing.

The disciple Thomas is more like us than he is like Indiana Jones. He isn't ready to make a leap of faith. For him, seeing is believing. When the other disciples tell him on Easter

night that they have seen the Lord, Thomas says 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.”

Thomas wants visible proof. Like a scientist who needs to see empirical evidence, or a lawyer who insists on inspecting a signed contract, Thomas wants to see physical evidence that the crucified Christ has become the Risen Lord. Nail prints in the hands. A spear wound in the side. Visible proof that Jesus Christ has conquered death. This disciple is the Sergeant Joe Friday of the first century, wanting “Just the facts, ma’am.”

Fortunately, at least for Thomas, Jesus is willing to provide the evidence he is demanding. A week after Easter, Jesus appears to the disciples and says 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.” The visible proof of the resurrection is undeniable, and Thomas cries out, “My Lord and my God!” This single sentence is sometimes thought of as the climax of the Gospel of John, and it certainly contains one of the earliest Christian statements of faith: Jesus Christ, my Lord and My God!

Believing isn’t seeing

But this dramatic scene does not end here, with swelling violin music and lots of hugging. Jesus isn’t yet finished with Thomas. He says, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus wants Thomas and the other disciples to know that believing doesn’t depend on seeing. Most Christians will never get to see Jesus on earth, with or without wounds in his hands and his side, but they will still be challenged to believe. When it comes to Christian faith, believing isn’t seeing and seeing isn’t believing.

This is tough for us to accept. After all, we are 21st-century skeptics who would never buy a car, sign a contract or enter into a relationship without seeing what we were getting into. But Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” The writer of John’s Gospel then goes on to tell us that he has written his book “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.” Jesus is asking us to be like Indiana Jones and make a leap of faith, and John is encouraging us to have belief in Jesus based on what is written in the scriptures.

Are you ready to jump? Jesus challenges us, as he challenged Thomas, by saying, “Do not doubt but believe.” Will we be bold enough to step out into the canyon and trust God to hold us up, or will we stay frozen on the edge of the cliff, unable to move forward? Jesus shows us that in the Christian faith, seeing isn’t believing. But we’ve got to admit that it would be nice to see something beneath us, before we step into the abyss.

Trust the instructions

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana learns that his father has been searching for the Holy Grail, guided by an incomplete inscription from a stone tablet. In

the course of the adventure, Indiana finds a complete version of the inscription in a half-flooded catacomb. He uses that set of instructions to find the location of the Grail.

Like Indiana Jones, we are not always able to see the thing that means the most to us, whether it is the Holy Grail or the Risen Lord. But we are given some important messages to guide us. Indiana finds an ancient inscription, and we are given the words of the Bible. In both cases, the challenge is to trust the instructions.

Right after the story of Thomas, Jesus again appears to his disciples, this time by the Sea of Tiberias. First, Jesus instructs the disciples to cast their net to the right side of the boat, and they haul in one hundred and fifty-three large fish. Then he cooks breakfast for the disciples and has a conversation with Peter. When Peter professes his love for Jesus, over and over, Jesus gives him the simple instructions, “Feed my lambs” ... “Tend my sheep”... “Feed my sheep.”¹

Our faith is strengthened not by seeing the mark of the nails in the hands of Jesus, but by trusting the instructions he gives us. When we believe his words and follow his guidance, we will find that our efforts are rewarded, as the disciples discovered with their large haul of fish. We will find that Jesus will give us exactly what we need for life, just as he cooked breakfast for the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. And we will come to know that the best way to show our love for Jesus is to feed and tend the people around us, all of whom are part of the flock of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

Prime the pump

Faith requires a leap, but not a leap into a bottomless canyon. Instead, faith requires a step into a future that we cannot see, following the instructions that we are given in Holy Scripture. Such a step involves making a choice about whether you will trust the ancient testimony of the Bible, and whether you will follow where it leads you. The choice to believe is a life-giving choice, because our Lord promises to support all who turn to him in faith.

The difficulty and the importance of making a leap of faith is captured in “The Parable of the Pump.” A man was lost in the desert and was faced with the possibility of dying from thirst. He found an old shack containing a water pump, a jug of water and a note. The note said that there was a leather gasket in the pump which needed to be saturated with water, and the jug had just enough water for that purpose. There was also a warning that the finder should not drink from the jar, not even one sip, for every drop was needed to prime the pump.

You can see the dilemma. If the man drank the jug of water, he would find temporary relief but he would cripple the pump. If he believed the instructions and followed them, he would sacrifice the jug of water but would enable the pump to work. Once working, the pump would give him all the water he needed.

Did he drink the water or prime the pump? What would *you* have done? The man needed to trust the instructions, and, in the face of uncertainty, to believe. He was forced to take a leap of faith, believing instead of seeing. Our Lord Jesus challenges us to do the same. May we not be faithless, but believing.