

April 11, 2010  
United Church of Northfield  
John 20: 19-31

Seeing Is Believing!  
Rev. Roger L. Brown

### Introduction - The *Nitella* story

When I was in graduate school, studying for a master's degree in the medical college at the University of Vermont, several years before I went to seminary, I discovered the amazing *Nitella* plant. In the process of my research project, I discovered some of the wonders of God's creation. I also came to experience the challenge of unlocking the secrets of nature.

Let me tell you about the amazing *Nitella* plant. I first found some *Nitella* plants in the shallow water in a large pond in Hinesburg, Vermont. The pond was about 10 miles from Burlington, and I'd learned where to find these plants from a botany professor at UVM. As you approach the shallow water, you see a green plant growing up from the bottom of the pond, like a tree with very thin branches. As I remember it, the whole plant might grow to be a foot tall. The plant was entirely green so it stood out and was easy to see.

Now the really amazing wonders of the *Nitella* would not be obvious to you if you just looked at one by standing next to the shore of the pond. The wonders of the plant could not be "seen" until it had been brought back to my laboratory on the third floor of the Medical College.

When I brought some plants back to the lab, and put it under a dissecting microscope, two wonders became astoundingly obvious. The first wonder was that the *Nitella* was made up of giant cells! Each cell could be one and a half inches long, and pencil lead thickness in diameter! This is huge for a single cell!

The second wonder appeared when I put it under the dissecting microscope. (A dissecting microscope is not very powerful.) It is just magnifies enough to see a little more detail on the inside of the cell and to see the whole cell end to end. What you see is the protoplasm streams – it moves in a long circle from one end of the cell to the other. (If you put your hand in a bathtub of water and slowly stirred it around, you would see the same

effect.) The technical name for this behavior is protoplasmic streaming.

The third wonder was the phenomenon I was most interested in studying. It was a behavior that cannot be seen with a dissecting microscope or with any microscope. It required the electronic equipment I had assembled and a special cell holder to observe this unique behavior. (I will tell you the behavior without confusing you by attempting to explain how I could detect it in any detail.) This little cell had the ability to send an electric impulse from one end to the other. I was interested in studying how human nerves sent messages, but they were too tiny, so I used this giant plant cell instead.

When I would send a message of an electric impulse down the length of the cell, the streaming would come to a stop. Then after a while it would begin again.

The amazing *Nitella* raises a number of interesting questions which you could ask as well as I could. Why does the cell stuff – the protoplasm stream around the cell? Why did the streaming stop when I shocked the cell? How did the *Nitella* send the electric message down the length of the cell? Why did the cells grow so big?

I knew how the cell sent the message down the length of the cell. I did not know why the protoplasm streamed around the cell interior. There were many theories. I still don't know the answers to these questions. When I finished my degree, there were yet more questions, but very few answers. In the process, I learned how to do scientific research and earned by degree. I also discovered the great challenge of unlocking the mysteries of the Universe. This experience also increased my curiosity about God's wonderful world.

#### Transition to John Text

The story illustrates several things about our life experience.

The first is that we cannot see everything that is there. Put another way, when we “see” something, other things there are not seeable. If you look at the *Nitella* in the shallow pond, you cannot see the protoplasmic streaming. Even after you could “see” the streaming with a microscope, you could not guess that the cell was capable of sending an electric impulse.

If I told you that the cell did these things, you might not believe me. If I brought you to my lab, and showed you, then you would believe me. I think you would believe me, but

you probably would not understand what was going on inside the cell.

### Scripture Connection

In our scripture story for this morning, something similar is going on. Jesus has appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room, but the disciple who was not there, did not believe it when the disciples told him of Jesus appearance. Thomas is so famous for being the skeptical disciple that he is known as “doubting Thomas.” Thomas had been very worried that matters would turn out badly for Jesus. No doubt the death of Jesus convinced him that his worse guesses had come true, and he had gone away to recover from the events of Jesus' last days alive. So, depressed and discouraged, he was not with the disciples when Jesus appeared to them in the Upper Room. Many days later, when Thomas is with the disciples, Jesus appears again and the skeptical Thomas says, “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.”

Yes, for Thomas, seeing is believing.

When Thomas has seen and touched, he believes with strong conviction. He announces, “My Lord and my God!” When Thomas finally establishes his conviction, he does so with firm vigor. At first, Jesus, himself, seems to be puzzled by Thomas' lack of faith. For Jesus first says, “Have you believed because you have seen me?” Thomas answer is not recorded, but Thomas' response might be to admit some confusion since had been traveling with Jesus for a long time.

Jesus, however, lets go of Thomas' skepticism, and proclaims a truth of faith. He says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Thank God for Jesus' words. For he may speak for many of us. We have not seen Jesus in the flesh, but we believe in the resurrection. Jesus has spoken of the “leap of faith.”

### Connect to My Belief Survey Results

Some of us have to “see” in order to believe. Some of us are more willing to take a “leap of faith” in our belief system.

I began to wonder if it is true that some of us can take the leap of faith, and others of us need to “see” Jesus in some way? The question of how we know God is the

fundamental question for the conference that I attended in Sigtuna, Sweden in April of 2008. The was the conference of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology. (In fact this society is concluding its 2010 conference today in Edinburg, Scotdtland) The keynote speakers for the conference in Sweden in 2008 addressed the question “How Do We Know?” Do we know through science or do we know through theology – meaning faith? At the conference I gave a short presentation to answer the question of why people believe in God. In order to answer this question in a very practical way, I gave people a simple survey to find out. Let me share with you a brief summary of the results from 35 questionnaires.

### My Belief Survey Results

Since the conference is about the relationship between science and religion, I asked people if science influenced their belief in God. Science is a kind of “knowing.”

For some people, science helped them believe in God. For others science had nothing to do with their belief in God. It was amazing that some of the scientist in my survey said that science had no influence on their decision to believe in God.

For several people, the science that influenced their belief system, was not hard science. It was the science of psychology, and the science of Biblical textual criticism. Others said that science showed how awesome and amazing the universe is, and only a God could create it.

### Influence of Experience

For others, they had to experience God in some way. They cite the experience of being in church, of worship, of special spiritual experiences. They describe God as very caring and loving, because the people they meet in church, especially, are caring and loving.

### Survey comments

The experience of discovering God near at hand, or touching and feeling his presence seems to far outweigh any intellectual approach to believing I God. This would suggest that, deep in our hearts, at the core of our conviction, we are like Thomas. We may not entirely doubt that Jesus is God, but we want to be convinced.

### UCC President John Thomas

UCC President John Thomas in his A Pastoral Letter on Faith

Engaging Science and Technology had this to say----

“Science shows us a cosmos that gives birth to stars, galaxies, planets, life, mind, and self-consciousness, all emerging one after the other, each stage giving birth to what follows, each playing its part in the interactive dance of cosmic self-generation. Through these discoveries, science reveals a new picture of human beings as tiny creatures in a vast cosmic sea. We are filled with amazement and awe, and we are brought face to face with new questions about ourselves and our place in the universe. Are we alone? Does the universe have a purpose? What does it mean to be human?”

“Questions like these are as old as scripture and as new as the latest discoveries of physics and biology. For many people today, old answers to these questions are no longer credible. Science is sometimes unsettling because it destroys old foundations without providing new ones. Yet because of science, many today are on a new search for meaning. Can our church address the seekers of today? Can we offer a word for our time, one full of hope and encouragement, one taken seriously for its keen insight and honest comprehension? Can we dare to seek, to wonder, and if necessary to doubt until we believe anew, confident that in the end we will be filled with a fresh faith that engages the hunger in so many hearts and minds?”

### Conclusion

For Thomas, the skeptical disciple, seeing is believing. Even after 3 years of sharing Jesus' journeys around Palestine, and listening to his teaching, he still needed the proof of concrete evidence. Even though Jesus made repeated predictions about his passion time, Thomas did not believe.

Thomas response to grave spiritual disappointment was human and normal – he withdrew from the fellowship, and for a week or so called it quits in the discipleship business. Then he returned to the fold, the comfort of the fellowship of the Upper Room.

This is not unlike our own response when we experience a faith crisis or a “dark night of the soul “ We withdraw from the presence of Jesus, but he is there when we are ready to return to him. Like the experience of Thomas, a faith crisis may ultimately strengthen our faith, if we are honest with ourselves, and we are open to a time of healthy

doubt and say to God, “prove it!”

### On Seeing

Sometimes, in our moments of skepticism and doubt, we do not see Jesus. We need to practice “seeing him.” We need to “touch” him. We need to immerse ourselves in his presence. Let me suggest some possibilities.

Now that we are in the glorious month of April when the earth begins to wake up from its winter sleep, we can be reminded of the renewing power of God. Already we can see the buds appearing on the bare, dead-like tree branches. Already, the grass this week is turning from a sad yellow brown to a delightful green..

Let me now close with the wonderful words of the beginning of the first letter of John in the New Testament. This proclamation of one of the great truths and joys of the Christian faith speaks so powerfully of seeing and believing.

### Quote from I John I: 1-5

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. [Amen!](#)”