

Sermons from Parma Greece United Church of Christ

WELL, HERE WE ARE

Easter-2

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John 20:19-31

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Jesus Appears to the Disciples

When 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.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Jesus and Thomas

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, 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 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.'

A 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.' Then 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.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

The Purpose of This Book

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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.

John 20:19-31

Well, here we are again on Thomas Sunday. Good old doubting Thomas. Thomas could be the patron saint of modern people. Thomas was reported to have been a twin, and it's possible he was an identical twin" as such, he would have known all about mistaken identity. He would have known how easy it is to be wrong about something, even when we see it with our own eyes. He couldn't take the disciples word about having seen Jesus alive; he needed proof; he needed to be sure.

Jesus says to Thomas, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. That would be us. We didn't make it to the empty tomb, didn't see the angels, didn't hear Jesus call us by name in the garden. We weren't in the upper room with the other disciples when they got to see Jesus.

When we hear the gospel stories, we sometimes identify with the characters in them. Are we like Peter, overcome by fears when things get tough? Could we be strong like the women, who stayed with Jesus despite the cost? Well maybe. But most of all, we're like Thomas. We have doubts. We want proof.

Most of us long for accuracy in the stories about Jesus so that we can feel that we have that proof all the witnesses are in agreement, so this is exactly what happened. Some of us create that neat and tidy bundle in our heads, but many of us only manage to produce a package that looks like it was wrapped by an inexperienced buffoon, a package that definitely would not stand up to the rigors of the postal service.

Yet we long for that neat and tidy package that will build our faith, help us believe when we're in a crisis, and keep us going over the long haul of discipleship.

What we get from the gospel are stories filled with conflicting accounts. Some people see only the empty tomb, some see an angel or two angels, some see Jesus, some talk with Jesus, some only recognize Jesus when he breaks the bread. Everyone seems to have been caught off guard by the resurrection. The disciples don't seem to be able to capture their experience with any accuracy. They always seem surprised by Jesus' appearances. They seem to struggle to deal with how resurrection works.

Yet Jesus comes to them in their fear, their confusion, and their doubts and greets them with Peace be with you. He even makes a return visit the next week so that Thomas can experience the resurrection first hand. It is important for us to remember that Jesus does not come to the disciples in a blaze of glory, surrounded by angels or accompanied by trumpet flourishes. Rather he comes quietly; he seems to surprise the disciples. And he comes with his wounds, the wounded savior coming to his wounded disciples. He is not all neat and tidy, but still bears the marks of his suffering, the marks of his humanity. Even his resurrected body still shows the signs of his dwelling among us.

As humans, we struggle to hide our woundedness as a sign of weakness, yet the risen Christ still bears his woundedness and comes to meet us and bring us his peace. His resurrection gives us hope that we will be healed and made whole. When the risen Lord came to the disciples in the upper room, he brought them his peace, he breathed his spirit on them and commissioned them to live and preach his message of love, forgiveness, and peace. In the creation story, God molded Adam out of the clay and breathed life into him. In the upper room, Jesus breathes the restoring life of God into the disciples, making them new people and, through them, offering new life to the world.

The very fact that we are here this morning, continuing to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, is testimony to the power of the Spirit present in the disciples and in the church throughout the ages. This story isn't a vignette frozen in time in that upper room in Jerusalem; it is gospel, good news that transcends time and place.

Whenever we practice forgiveness, whenever we overcome the power of death in its many form's hatred, violence, indifference, the spirit of Christ is alive and well in believers, and resurrection life is expressed again in this time and place.

We can't prove• the resurrection, but we can be fingers pointing to it whenever we are signs that the life of Christ has not been extinguished, but is enfleshed in us and in every Christian community. Jesus appearance to Thomas reminds us that doubts do not disqualify us from

discipleship. Jesus says to Thomas and to us, do not doubt, but believe. The theologian Paul Tillich said that doubt isn't the opposite of faith; rather it is an element of faith. Fred Buechner, Presbyterian pastor and writer, puts it more basic terms. He says that if we don't have any doubts, we're either kidding ourselves or asleep. He characterizes doubts as the ants in the pants of faith they keep it awake and moving! Doubts do not disqualify us from discipleship.

At the very beginning of the Gospel of John, the author proclaims that, through Jesus, God has brought life and light to the world. In the death of Jesus on the cross, it appeared that the powers of darkness were stronger than the power of light, that darkness had overcome the light. Through the resurrection, we are shown that the light still shines. Jesus commissioned the disciples to continue his work, to spread his light throughout the world. Their future changed through Christ gift of the Spirit.

In our baptism, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and made Christ's own forever. We, too, have a new future because of Christ's resurrection. We, too, have been commissioned to spread the light of Christ. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, a contemporary theologian, asks us to think about the resurrection through the metaphor of the sun. She says, We, cannot look directly at the sun, for the brightness would blind us, our eyes are not suited to that strength of light. Yet the sun, which we cannot see directly, illumines all else, and in its light, we make our way in the world. She goes on to say that the resurrection illumines the entire landscape of the New Testament: the resurrection is the confirmation of that which Jesus revealed in his life and death and it is the catalyst that transforms the disciples, releasing the power that led to the foundation of the church.

On this April morning, when the world outside our doors has put away the baskets and the bunnies of Easter and moved on, we continue to be challenged to live as though the resurrection really does illumine our lives. We are challenged to reach out and embrace the future in faith, believing that the light of the resurrection will enable us to make our way in the world. We are challenged to seek peace and reconciliation, knowing it is the work of Christ and the Church.

And most of all, we are challenged to remember that while we may look at ourselves and see only doubting Thomas's, God looks at us and sees the best:

God sees beloved children, faithful friends, spirit-filled partners in the ongoing work of creation.
Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.