

FROM DOUBT TO FAITH
John 20:19-31
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 27, 2014

Last Sunday we celebrated Christ's resurrection with the joyful proclamation, "He is risen. He is risen indeed!" Here we are a week later, most of our Easter flowers are claimed by their donors and attendance has returned to normal. We're back to business as usual, dealing with the same life issues we've been facing all along, but with the hope that we are still God's Easter people, raised to new life through Christ, our Risen Lord.

Having said that, let's look at the last two verses of this morning's gospel lesson:
"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But they are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing in him you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

One of the things I appreciate about the stories in the Bible is there are no whitewash or cover up jobs. For instance, we know about Peter's three denials of Christ on Good Friday only because Peter himself told the story, even though it made him look weak and cowardly. Likewise, instead of covering up their petty arguments (who's the greatest?) with each other all the disciples knew it was necessary to reveal their faults and doubts so we could identify with and benefit from their failures, and realize the full, abundant life isn't earned by merit but gifted by grace.

So on this Second Sunday of Easter this morning's gospel story tells what happened on the two consecutive Sunday evenings after Christ's resurrection for a specific reason: so "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 20:31)

Let's now review what happened on that first evening. Even though John and Peter saw the tomb was empty and all of them heard Mary Magdalene saying, "I have seen the Lord," the disciples were still holed up behind locked doors, afraid they were still on the High Priest's hit list. Again, no cover ups or whitewashing.

The disciples could have spun the story they were meeting in the Upper Room to strategize their grand plan to spread the word of Christ's resurrection, but they were brave and honest enough to confess they were still stuck in their Good Friday "scared rabbit" mode.

It's in this heavy atmosphere of doubt and fear Jesus suddenly appeared with the greeting, "Peace be with you." Now imagine what Jesus could have said. "Thanks for running away when I needed you most guys. And thank you Peter for your three heartfelt denials. I'm only here to say you've let me down for the last time. You're all fired."

Instead, Jesus said, “Peace be with you.” It was in that same room, three days earlier just hours before his crucifixion, Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” (John 14:27)

The world’s definition of peace, the absence of violence and strife, isn’t what Jesus offers. Jesus’ peace is eternal and not of this world. His peace surpasses all human understanding, and makes for our highest good. The world’s peace is through the avoidance of trouble. Jesus’ brand of peace empowers us to face our troubles with increasing strength and conviction. That same brand of peace empowering Jesus to endure his Good Friday enables us to face our Good Fridays. Remember, we are the Easter people, nothing in creation can separate us from God because Christ defeated sin and death the moment he stepped out of his tomb.

If it all sounds too good to be true, that explains why we sometimes doubt these Easter stories, “written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing in him you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30-31)

If it’s any consolation, you’re not alone in your doubts and fears. Apparently the first disciples, who were there in the Upper Room when Christ appeared to them, weren’t much better than we are at accommodating their lives to Christ’s new and expanding reality.

That’s why Jesus breathed on them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit,” because living the full, abundant life can’t be done by ourselves. We need the Lord and giver of life to make it happen.

John wrote this story with the full awareness of the creation story in Genesis, when the wind or breath of God brooded over the face of the deep and God breathed life into Adam. That same Spirit now breathed life into the disciples, filling them with grace and empowering them to become the first Easter people who’d go out and change the world.

Our middle hymn this morning is a prayer, asking God to breath on us as well.
*Breathe on me breath of God,
Fill me with life anew.
That I may love what thou dost love,
And do what thou wouldst do.
Breathe on me breath of God,
Till I am wholly thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with thy fire divine.*

So it wasn’t just knowledge of the resurrection that transformed those terrified disciples into purpose driven Apostles, it was the Holy Spirit, breathing into them new life and the vision to bring the Peace of Christ to a world in turmoil.

But this isn't the end of the story. Thomas, absent from the group that first evening didn't experience the Risen Christ and receive the Holy Spirit, so when the others told Thomas, "While you were out, guess who unexpectedly showed up?" Thomas either couldn't or wouldn't believe them. That's when he famously declared he wouldn't believe unless he touched Jesus' wounds with his own two hands, and thereby forever earned for himself the nick name "Doubting Thomas."

How would you like to be remembered for all time because you said one thing you'd later regret? So let's not be too hard on poor Thomas, because any one of us would express the same doubts. You see, Thomas was still under the influence of Good Friday. It wasn't his fault. Just because you're told something doesn't necessarily make it true, you need to experience truth before you can believe it.

That's why Jesus reappeared a week later when all of them, Thomas included, were together again in the Upper Room. This time Jesus returned for the sole purpose of including Thomas in the resurrection experience, causing Thomas to fall on his knees confessing, "My Lord and My God."

Seeing is believing, and believing is seeing. That's why Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That last beatitude covers all of us. Unlike Mary, Peter, John and Thomas we haven't seen the Risen Christ with our own eyes or touched his wounds with our own hands and yet we have the same capacity to believe, plus the freedom to doubt, as you search for the truth. And as you search, you have permission to ask these essential questions: "Are you really there God?" "Do you really love me?" "How come you seem so far away when I need you now more than ever?"

You also have God's permission to doubt and question the scriptures, your life's purpose, even God's will. You can even question the resurrection, as long as you are also willing to question your doubts and be open to the inevitability that, like the Doubting Thomas, you too will fall on your knees confessing to Christ, "My Lord and my God."

So, there's nothing wrong with being a Doubting Thomas because our God is God and God doesn't doubt you anymore than he doubted those poor pre Easter stumbling, bumbling disciples whose doubts and fears were as great as our own. And that's why their doubts and fears, even on the day of Christ's resurrection, weren't covered up or white washed: "But these things were written down so you may come to believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing, you may have life in his name."

One more thing. It was pointed out to me last Sunday Thomas never actually put his hands and fingers in Christ's wounds. He didn't have to. His doubts gave way to belief as he was caught up in Jesus' presence. May all our doubts and fears pass away as the Spirit breathes on us and we are raised up to new life through Christ our Risen Lord!