

Sunday April 8, 2018 - 10:00 a.m.
*Please stand if you are able

Prelude

Welcome, Announcements and Recognition of April Birthdays

We Gather Around God's Word

Bells and Chimes Call To Worship:

Introit: #245 "The Day of Resurrection"

***Call to Worship:** ☺

- L: A new day: **P: Christ lives!**
L: In our hearts and in our world: **P: Christ lives!**
L: In the face of an unexpected neighbor: **P: Christ Lives!**
L: As we share God's abundance: **P: Christ lives!**
L: As we care for God's creation: **P: Christ lives!**
L: As we share the good news, let our joy be complete: **P: Christ lives!**

***Opening Hymn: #241 "Joy Dawned Again on Easter Day"**

Prayer of Invocation: ☺

Holy God, who made the world and called it good,
who calls humanity into community with you and with each other,
who breathes within our world and calls us to peace and justice,
make your presence known to us here gathered
that we may recognize you
in the wounds of our sisters and brothers,
and make real for them your hope of abundant life,
through Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen savior.

Extending God's Peace

- L: As we rise up to new life in Christ may the peace of Christ be with you all.
P: And also with you.

Special Music: by: Carol Scribner "Jesus Loves Me"

We Engage God's Word

Scripture Readings: Psalm 133
John 20:19-31

(Page 520)
(Page 927)

Youth Moment/Lord's Prayer

Reflection ***"Believe It or Not"***

Scripture: Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." John 20:24-25

How many of you remember the program Ripley's Believe It or Not? Robert Ripley enjoyed collecting strange and amazing bits of information that were unbelievable, but true. Not only did he write a book, but his interesting collection of stories was made into a television series. I can remember watching some of the programs but couldn't tell you today what those interesting facts were, but here are some examples from his book that I found in my research.

According to Mr. Ripley, a boy went to the doctor because he had a pain in his foot. The doctor discovered that the boy had a tooth growing in the bottom of his foot. You may be surprised to know that a man by the name of James Cook once had a chicken that laid a perfectly square egg. Now, we have seen white eggs, brown eggs, even spotted eggs, but I would venture to say none of us has ever seen a square egg. Did you know that the world's largest hot dog was over 3000 feet long, weighed 885 pounds, and took 103 butchers to carry it? Joann Barnes, a fifteen-year-old from California, once swung sixty-eight hula-hoops on her body at the same time! This book is filled with a lot of things that I think many of us would have to see to believe, but if they are true, they are true, whether we believe it or not!

The same is true of Christ's resurrection, whether Thomas or any of the other disciples believed it or not, did not stop it from being true. In the crucifixion God allowed a sinful humanity in their blindness and lust for personal power, to nail Jesus to the cross. God used the cross to show the depth of God's love for us and desire for reconciliation over condemnation in that even while nailed to the cross Jesus intercedes for humanity crying "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." The cross also displays to us that God does not control humanity like some puppets on strings, but allows humanity to use their free will in both positive and negative ways. God then used the cross to display the power of God, showing that not even death can stop God. In the resurrection we see how God can bring new life even out of the most shameful death. God can take even the most debilitating circumstances and transform them into life giving and life transforming events.

On the Sunday that Jesus rose from the grave, Thomas was not the only doubter. Instead of taking the women's word that the tomb was empty two of the disciples had to run and check it out for themselves. The empty tomb was no guarantee of the resurrection, but maybe somebody stole his body. Mary didn't recognize the risen Christ until he called her name, and the two on the road to Emmaus didn't recognize Jesus until he broke bread with them. Even if the disciples did believe it might be possible that Jesus had truly risen from the dead, fear kept them bolted behind locked doors. They had no idea what to do with this information. Still today we may proclaim this but like the disciples are unsure what to make of this information.

So, why include this story of doubt at all? I believe this story of doubt is here because it continues to show the depth of God's love and the great measure God will go to reach out to humanity in their depths of despair, fear, doubt and confusion in order that they may have peace and true life, not merely existence in Jesus. In this story of doubters and skeptics we not only

see the disciples, but find ourselves as well. It no longer is a story of ancient history, but one that deals with our current reality. If death was not going to stop the word and will of God, neither was despair, doubt, fear, and confusion going to stop it. God met the disciples behind their locked doors, blind eyes, and heavy hearts, not in condemnation but in love, patience and understanding. God gave them what they needed to not only believe but to then act on that belief. Once they believed, God commissioned them to carry on the work that was begun in Christ as he breathed into them the breath of the Holy Spirit.

If God has done this for the disciples, will God not continue to do the same for us. God knows that we often times need the tangible. Especially in times of darkness and trial, we need to hear, feel, touch, smell, and taste. Because we believe the testimony of others we believe that God became incarnate in Jesus, lived among us and died for our transgressions so that humanity might have a tangible sign of God's love. We also believe we have been given the gift of the sacraments as continued tangible reminders of what God has done in the past, is doing within us now, and will continue to do in the future. Still, sometimes this is not enough to help us carry on, like Thomas, we need something even more tangible than the witness of others; we need to experience the reality of God for ourselves. Because we have heard how God reached out to Thomas in his doubt we have that hope that God will reach out to us in the same way.

Though Thomas is noted for being the biggest skeptic of them all, Thomas is also the one, who once convinced, professed his belief in no uncertain terms. A skeptic turned believer becomes a very strong advocate. We need not feel guilty about our doubts and skepticism, but remain open to how God will speak to us in our doubts and fears.

As the Father has sent Jesus, so also he sends the disciples, including Thomas. Empowered by the Holy Spirit they are to extend this mission of peace, reconciliation, and God's love in the world. An important part of carrying on that mission is understanding Jesus' words "If you forgive anyone their sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them they are retained." Don Schwager explains Jesus' words in this way and I have a tendency to agree with him. Rather than seeing these words as the church's authority to forgive sins or to hold onto them, understood as giving the church authority to send people to heaven or to hell, he sees them as words of recognition of reality. That is, they can either forgive the sins of those who have killed Jesus and who have persecuted them or they can hold onto them. Jesus' wish for peace means that they cannot hold onto them. Mr. Schwager believes what is happening is simply that Jesus is describing the reality of the situation. In the aftermath of his death, Jesus' disciples can either forgive the sins of those who have attacked him and killed him and who will continue to persecute the followers of Jesus, or they can "hold onto" these sins, maintaining their anger and their fear and be paralyzed by it. They chose not to be paralyzed by it anymore.

A more recent illustration of this would be in the following story:

Amy Biehl died a violent death in 1993. She was a 26-year-old Fulbright scholar who had gone to South Africa to help register black voters for their first free election. But even though she was seeking to help the people of South Africa, as she was driving one day, she was dragged out of her car, stabbed and beaten to death by a mob which was committed to violence in order to overthrow of the apartheid government. Soon afterward, Amy's parents, Linda and Peter Biehl, quit their jobs and moved from their Orange County, California home to South Africa — not to seek revenge, but to start a foundation in Amy's name. Today, two of her killers work for the foundation. They call Mrs. Biehl "Makhulu," or grandmother, because of the way she treats them. She says, "Forgiving is looking at ourselves and saying, 'I don't want to go through life

feeling hateful and revengeful, because that's not going to do me any good.' We took Amy's lead. We did what we felt she would want."

This is the picture of reconciliation, of the ministry God has called the disciples, both then and now to carry on as the story of creation continues to unfold and we find ourselves in the midst of this sacred story, even though times doubt and confusion may be experienced. It not only forgives, it reaches out to restore. It pays back good for evil. It follows the heart and character of God, for the Bible says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the mind of Christ." Peace be with you!"

God of love and majesty, even in our doubts and fears, by the gift of your Holy Spirit empower us to be vessels of your peace in this world. Amen.

We Respond to God's Word

Hymn of Response: #249 "Peace I Leave with You, My Friends"

Sharing Joys, Concerns, and Prayers for the World

Call to Offering/ Offertory

***Doxology:**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise God all creatures here below;
Praise God for all that love has done;
Creator, Christ and Spirit, One. Amen.**

***Prayer of Dedication:** 🌍 (In Unison)

***O God of life,
take these gifts and bless them, multiply them,
put them to work in your world
wherever there is need of peace, of justice, of hope.
Put them to work in your world to care for your earth,
your water, your air--all the created elements that sustain your children.
We offer them to you as a witness to your love that makes our joy complete!
Amen.***

We Are Sent Into the World

***Sending Hymn: "Let There Be Peace on Earth" (See PowerPoint)**

*** Benediction and Response:**

GO NOW IN PEACE

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