
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Marks of Faith

A Sermon by

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Scripture: John 20:19-31

April 19, 2009

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🎵 God is still speaking,

There was still leftover lamb. What they had sacrificed in their Passover preparations, they were still eating, well into the seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread. The two feasts begin almost at the same time and sometimes they are referred to as one.¹ Just like the Thanksgiving turkey that is still hanging around in soup when we are getting ready for the Christmas dinner.

They were still nibbling on the horseradish, the bitter herb. The Haroset, the apple, cinnamon, nuts and juice mixture, representing the mortar the Israelites used to build the Egyptians cities and the sweetness of a better world, was still their comfort food.

Even a week later, they were still huddled in fear and feeling overwhelmed, not knowing “where to turn or what to do next. Their leader and teacher who had held them together...into that tomb went their hope, their vision, their sense of direction and purpose in life...they knew they had deserted Jesus in his hour of need...were they more disappointed and disillusioned with themselves or with Jesus?”²

This has been the worst Passover ever! Have you ever had one of those?

- The worst birthday ever?
- The worst Christmas?
- The worst family reunion?

Many times we mark our memories with tragic events.

- “The Easter my mother died.”
- “The January I was diagnosed.”
- “The day we learned...”

Isn't it true that we mark the larger world in much the same way?

- “The worst global financial crisis.”
- “The worst border violence.”
- “The worst unemployment.”
- “The worst rates of depression and mental illness.”

Listening to all that, I might just lock myself in my room for a week also! Health problems, kids problems, too much work, too much worry, too much coming at us, so much to run away from, so much to fear. What's an overwhelmed person of faith to do? Even one week after the music of the trumpets and the splendor of the flowering cross, how are we to live ‘as Easter people’?³

¹ Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg, *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*, Zondervan, p. 106.

² <http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/183/Marks-of-Faith-Apr-1319.aspx>

³ <http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/183/Marks-of-Faith-Apr-1319.aspx>

No wonder more churches are resurrecting an old Easter custom begun by the Greeks in the early centuries called “Bright Sunday”. Bright Sunday was filled with celebrating, days of laughter, parties, picnics, and practical jokes. “Why the long faces? Jesus is alive.”

Could you use a little humor, “little” maybe being the operative word?

This would never happen in our Order of Worship, but church bulletins have been known to have errors in them. Marcia would die if I mentioned how grateful and thankful we are for the wonderful work that she does to prepare orders of worship in five different formats, Saturday night, Sunday 9 am small, large and ready to be converted into Braille, and Sunday 10:30, so I won’t say anything more about Marcia. But some church bulletins have bloopers in them like:

- Ladies, don’t forget the rummage sale. It’s a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.
- Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our community.
- Next Thursday there will be tryouts for the choir. They need all the help they can get.
- At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What Is Hell?' Come early and listen to our choir practice.
- Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.
- The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility.
- Potluck supper Sunday at 5 pm—prayer and medication to follow.

What great advice in health and wellness to remember to laugh every day at something, even if it is at yourself.

It is a great temptation to huddle ourselves together behind our closed doors, to hide out from the world which is in pain and great need. It is a great temptation to snigger to ourselves or out loud, “So where are all those others this Sunday?” to make ourselves somehow better, or more deserving of God’s love and points for heaven.

New Testament professor Gail O’Day says that the heart of this lesson is that Jesus comes again and again to these scared and confused disciples. The disciples have not warranted a second visit by Jesus, but they get one, and with it, a renewed gift of his peace.⁴

On this second visit it is Thomas who takes center stage. Thomas has been called the ‘doubter’, but this is only in John’s Gospel. Throughout the Gospel of John he is called the ‘twin’. Thomas is mentioned three times in the Gospel of John. John 11:16 when Lazarus has just died and the disciples are resisting Jesus’ decision to return to Judea where the Jews had previously tried to stone Jesus, Thomas says bravely, “Let us also go, that we may die with Jesus.”

⁴ Gail O’Day, Feasting on the Word.

John 14, at John's account of the Last Supper/Passover, Jesus is telling the disciples to let not their hearts be troubled. Jesus is going to prepare a place for them. Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus responds, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

And today's word, John chapter 20, at Jesus' first appearance to the disciples through the closed doors, Thomas was not there. He was out running errands. He was perhaps near the Temple, listening for the 'word on the street'. He was perhaps visiting with Mary Magdalene hearing once again her story that the tomb was empty; she saw it herself. Perhaps Thomas was even visiting the tomb for himself, refusing to believe it was all over. That they had failed Jesus. That Jesus had failed them. He does not sound like a doubter to me. Thomas sounds more like one who had a dream, and as the dream was crushed, he tried to discover why. Failure was not an option. Dream, discover, design a new way begin again.

Thomas was more often referred to as 'Didymos Judas Thomas', Didymos meaning Twin. Twin to whom? Few texts identify Thomas' twin, though in the Book of Thomas the Contender, one of the Lost Gospels found in 1945, the twin is said to be Jesus himself, "Now, since it has been said that you are my twin and true companion, examine yourself."⁵

When Thomas the Twin walks back into that room and sees Jesus and hears him say "Peace be with you", he does not doubt. Rather he proclaims, "My Lord and my God!" "Thomas, perhaps for the first time, saw not just the 'face of Jesus' but the 'truth of Jesus and the truth of who Jesus was for him.'" Thomas the twin saw Jesus with his heart. "To see Jesus with the heart is to know that in the long run his kind of life is the only kind of life worth living."

To see Jesus with the heart is not only to believe in him but little by little to become bearers to each other of his healing life until we become finally healed and whole and alive within ourselves. To see Jesus with the heart is to take heart, to grow true hearts, brave hearts, at last."⁶

And so, we take heart.

Whatever overwhelms us, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever hunger and need we feel deep in our souls, God calls us to the table, feeds us well, and sends us out into the world to be justice and peace, salt and light, hope for the world.

To a broken hearted group of disciples then, Jesus said, "Peace be with you." To a broken hearted group of disciples now, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." Amen.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*