

“Hard To Believe” – John 20:19-31 – Easter 2 – Apr 23, 2006

The smell of fear in the room was palpable. Nobody moved, nobody spoke. Through the locked doors they hear the sounds of searchers, muffled voices calling out to each other to ask which rooms had been searched, which ones were empty. Occasionally the latch on the heavy doors would rattle, as someone tried it, hoping to discover those rebels inside. Otherwise the silence was complete as they collectively held their breath, hoping and praying they would not be discovered, and that before too long they could slip out of the city to safety.

The grief in the room was as strong as the fear. The silence that helped keep them from being discovered also provided a heavy blanket over their grief, and pain, and sense of overwhelming loss. They had not only lost their beloved Teacher, they had lost faith. All of it had been so magnificent: the walks along sunlit paths, discussing and discovering the story of God’s involvement in the lives of people over all those many centuries; learning of the power of God at work in this incredible man, watching as he healed with a word, with a touch; celebrating with the crowds as word of his mighty deeds and inspired teaching spread throughout the land. It had been a wondrous and a glorious time, but now these were only memories, and recalling those memories brought into contrast the searing pain, dismay, discouragement, depression, and gloom of this tightly-sealed room. Here in this self-imposed dungeon those memories seemed from a place much further away than just outside the door, and much longer ago than just a few days. Here was their new reality: powerless, hunted and fearing for their very lives.

In that den of depression, they had to admit that it was over. The evidence was too clear, that in spite of all the miracles they had witnessed, even though they had seen with their very eyes how the scriptures had been fulfilled as the eyes of the blind were opened, the legs of the lame danced anew, the lepers shed their rags and their oppression, in spite of all the miraculous deeds, their beloved Teacher had been powerless to save himself, had been executed, and now it was their turn. All that they had believed, all that they had hoped for, all was for nothing now. All that was left was their pain, their grief, their overwhelming sense of loss. All that was left in that room was the smell of fear as they huddled together, quietly and desperately trying to comfort each other.

Their grief and despair was so complete, so thick they could barely see their beloved Teacher as he appeared in their midst. And as they recognized this man who so recently had been so undeniably dead standing among them, their terror became complete. Instead of providing comfort, his unexplainable appearance with them behind locked doors was one more terror piled upon them, fueling their fear, annealing their distrust. What grace and mercy that the first words to them from the risen Jesus were to provide comfort. “Peace be with you.”

What a disappointment those words of comfort must be to some of the churchy righteous today! Unfortunately there are many in the church today who would be happier if the first words from Jesus in that closed room were words of chastisement and condemnation. There are many today who not only wish Jesus had said, “Oh ye of little faith, why do you snivel behind closed doors?!” but are willing to read that kind of condemnation into the text. There are many people, clergy included or maybe clergy especially, who immediately move to highlight Thomas’ doubt, and to lever any doubt that exists in the pews into complete feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness.

But Jesus did not condemn the terrified disciples. Instead his first words were to comfort, to ease their pain and suffering, to calm their disturbed souls. “Peace be with you”, Jesus said. And he bolstered that comfort, assuring them that his appearance among them was not an illusion, but a comforting reality. Jesus showed them his hands, and his sides, and they were comforted and began to rejoice. There’s a great irony in that it was the signs of his death that were enough to break through to them and convince them he was alive. Signs of death, turned into signs of life. And then Jesus

confirmed his being alive by giving them the gift of the very breath of life, the Holy Spirit. No waiting fifty days in this gospel, the Holy Spirit was here given to the disciples even as they began to believe.

Can you imagine the scene? Can you imagine the giddy excitement of all in that room, grief and terror turned into glad rejoicing by the unbelievable appearance of Jesus, risen from the grave? Can you imagine how they must have sounded like fools, babbling to each other? I wonder if they had the character to apologize to Mary, now that they were behaving the same way that she had? Can't you just see how they appeared to Thomas, swarming around him, each one a little bit louder and more excited than the other as they try to convince him they had indeed seen Jesus? What chaos! What confusion! Who can blame Thomas for being somewhat skeptical?

And then it was Thomas' turn. A week later, just when things were settling down, just when the trauma was turning to a memory, just when the disciples were starting to get a grip on life again, once again Jesus stands among them. Again their reaction must have been one of fear, for again he calms them, "peace be with you". Jesus demonstrated not only that he already knew what Thomas needed, but also that he was (and is) the compassionate Lord, full of understanding and caring. "Put your finger here ... reach out and touch me", he invites Thomas, who can only respond with all the passion that is in him, "my Lord and my God!" What a powerful, spine-tingling moment it was then, and still is now. Once again the signs of death become the signs of life, and a believer inherits that life.

Again, I feel I must point out how so many people get it wrong here. I don't have to pause for more than a second or two in order to think of an all-too-significant number of colleagues who argue that it's the strength of one's faith that is the key to receiving God's grace – and let me be really clear that I think they've missed the point! To them, and to you, I would point out that Thomas, good old 'doubting' Thomas, is the last person to be converted in this gospel – and he was a disciple!! It is hard to believe, and so it is precisely to those whose faith is imperfect, to people who have real doubts, that Jesus comes and says, "Peace be with you." It is to the distressed, to those who want to believe but can't, that Jesus comes and says, "look, see, touch, believe." It is hard to believe that we are part of the world that God so loves that His Son came to offer life, and life abundant, but we are, and the proof is right here.

I think many of us slip into thinking this is the end of the story – Thomas is convinced, Thomas believes in Jesus, the end. Even the closing two verses of the chapter provide a wrap-up, with what sounds a lot like a final footnote, that even the NRSV titles with a concluding "The Purpose of This Book". Yes, there is another chapter that follows, with accounts of more appearances of Jesus to his disciples, but there is a certain finality to the verse "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."

But what we have is not an ending, but a beginning. This is the most pivotal moment and point of the whole Christ story. This is the moment when the disciples are transformed into the apostles (literally, "sent back" or "sent against" or "sent out"). This is that moment when they had to start to come to terms with the fact that their belief in Jesus was not just a "Hosanna" kind of joy ride, but that they had committed their entire life to him. Thomas may well have been the first to see clearly the depth of and the significance of what believing in the resurrection of Jesus might entail, namely a life-giving and life-long commitment.

In our 21st Century, highly-independent mind set that sounds a bit like a life sentence in prison, doesn't it – committing one's whole life entirely to Jesus. But these encounters with the risen Christ were for the disciples, and for us, not the end of the story but just the momentous beginning of a life-long story. "That you may believe ... and that you may have life". That is not a summary of what had happened, it is a statement of purpose of what will happen.

It's amazing, and somewhat discouraging, to see how a large part of the church has lost sight of what Thomas and the other disciples saw. Somehow many drifted into a misunderstanding that being a follower of Christ, a Christian, was about institutions, or organization, or rigid patterns of obedience, or membership. Many thought, and still think, that being a Christian was a kind of status that could be claimed or conferred. It's hard to believe such a church could continue to live, and many don't.

There are different approaches to responding in faith that have become recognized as a way of recapturing the faith of the disciples and the early church. Those 'new' understandings are called, among other things, the "missional church" movement, and the term comes from a deliberate attempt to recapture the word 'mission'. At the heart of this approach is an understanding that each congregation has a mission, is being called by God to a particular ministry or set of ministries in Christ's name. Key to this approach is a related understanding that we need to also recapture the concept of what being a disciple of Christ entails.

Congregations who remain fixed on institutional matters tend to look inward and focus on themselves, believing that the church exists to serve its members. These kinds of congregations are, in their later stages, characterized by declining numbers, aging members, worsening finances, undue attention to maintaining the building, existing programs and committees, and often talk only in terms of 'survival'. Expectations are mutually low – the members don't expect much of their church, and the church doesn't expect much from its members. I think if I asked you to name three such congregations you could do so without much trouble.

On the other hand, there are congregations who have turned their thinking around, and see the congregation existing not to serve the members, but that the members as committed disciples of Christ offer themselves in serving others in Christ's name. The whole focus moves from inward-looking to outward-acting, and there are such congregations that are alive, vibrant, financially-healthy and growing. I believe we are one of those congregations – barely started out on the road to whatever Emmaus God is calling us to, and with much to learn, but well-started on that road already. You might be encouraged to know that the Moderator on her recent visit, having heard what we do here at Central, was moved to say, "you certainly are a missional church!"

There are other ways to express the same kind of church renewal that moves away from a rigid, rule-based emphasis on organization and institution to a fun and fulfilling living in faith. Four of us (Rhoda, Sunny, Gillan and me) will soon attend a conference hosted by PEF-PIM to hear Dr. Kennon Callahan who presents a simple yet exciting way to help us live out our faith.

Frightening? Certainly! It's hard to believe that we're up to such a challenge, to wonder if our faith is strong enough, whether it's worth it to believe. Starts to sound a bit like Thomas, doesn't it? But that's OK, because the answer was there, provided for Thomas by the risen Christ, demonstrating with his hands and his side that He was willing to lead by example those who would follow, and by his resurrection that He had the power to give the life He promised those who would follow. That same answer is there for us as well, still provided by the risen Christ, still with the promise that those who can, and will, and do say, "I believe", will indeed find new, rich, rewarding, fulfilling life.