

April 28, 2019

The Second Sunday of Easter

Scripture Reading John 20:19-31 The Message (MSG)

19-20 Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you." Then he showed them his hands and side. 20-21 The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were exuberant. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you." 22-23 Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "**Receive the Holy Spirit,**" he said. "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

24-25 But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master. But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

26 Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room. This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

27 Then he focused his attention on Thomas. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe."

28 Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"

29 Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

30-31 Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.

Sermon To See, To Touch, To Believe

The season of Easter is above all a season of life: resurrection life, eternal life, or, as the end of this passage says, just plain "life" -- "that through believing you may have life in his name" (verse 31).

The word that comes to mind for me is that Hebrew word L'CHAIM( Literally: To life.) This was one of the first words I learned when I was headed to Israel to be a summer missionary as a college student.

We learned that “L’Chaim” reveals a lot about the Jewish approach to life. It is a phrase used before a toast or meal together and it is a phrase that encourages a remembrance to appreciate the gift of life.

The phrase is not to a good life, to a healthy life, or even to a long life. It is simply to life, recognizing that life is indeed good and precious and should always be celebrated and savored.

Last week on Easter Sunday we talked about faith. It was a Sunday to ask again, “What is faith?” I shared my understanding that, “Faith is being grasped by the power of love.”

We shared our United Church of Christ (UCC) statement of faith and affirmed our beliefs about God and relationships to one another and the world. The statement asserts our intellectual assent to beliefs we hold dear, but, we know it is more than words and a nod to beliefs. Faith goes beyond just our thoughts and words to our actions. Living faith is what the resurrected Jesus invited his disciples to remember and affirm.

His message became clearer after the shock of losing him. They realized that his work was their work and the way they lived their lives was their witnesses to his resurrection.

From the first witnesses to resurrection faith, we have come to believe that the Christian life is not about believing so that we can be saved. Rather, it’s about seeing what is already true. God loves us already and desires us to be in relationship with the Eternal One. The Christian life is about becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God.

We celebrate the way our gospels we read each Sunday tell us about life, abundant life and how to have it. That is why the readings after Jesus suffering and death are treasured. People reported meeting Jesus on a road, at the shore, in their homes where they were in hiding. .

The gospel of John is the gospel that teaches us about the importance of oneness and unity so you see the disciples struggling to find this unity in this passage. Some have witnessed Jesus coming to visit them and found

inspiration and hope in the gift “peace” bestowed. The disciple Thomas has not been with them in the previous appearances of Jesus to them so he is doubtful about what they report. When he, too, has this experience of seeing Jesus, he affirms his experience of the risen Jesus and doubts no more.

I like the story church historian, Martin Marty, told many years ago of the day a watermelon truck turned over right on his street. The children enjoyed the feast of sweet, sticky watermelons that day on the pavement. Sadly, Martin says he was away that weekend, visiting his grandmother. So, it is something like that for Thomas. The times when the disciples have had an experience of the risen Jesus, Thomas has not been present.

In this passage, Thomas has his turn. He’s overwhelmed with the experience he has and is soon with them to find a peace, a unity, a oneness so that Jesus’ work and life may be carried on.

Today we have that call as well. We heard news of the bomb attacks in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday and grieved with our Christian, Muslim and Buddhist friends. Our call is clearly to seek peace and unity for all faiths who grieve together over these brutal attacks on worshippers on an Easter Sunday.

As the disciples were in shock a week after Jesus’ crucifixion, we are in shock that senseless murder can be perpetrated by those who say they are people of faith. A week after 250 people were killed in the attacks by Islamist extremists, Sri Lanka needs our unity and support for them in their grief and fear.

Yes, fear is printed on so many faces. An unnatural quiet fills areas that should be busy, like Old Moor Street in Colombo where the Ibrahims ran their spice empire from behind an unassuming storefront with a gray gate. How could people know that they would be the bearers of violence on a joyful Easter Sunday?

Spice traders and truck drivers gathered next to Ishana, the Ibrahim family spice business, on Old Moor Street in Colombo. They were in shock and disbelief that two of the sons of the families were suicide bombers.

Investigators are still combing through the three hotels and three churches that were hit, searching for clues of how an obscure Islamist group with no history of serious violence could execute one of the deadliest attacks in the world in recent years.

Behind each of the little white funeral flags fluttering across Colombo is a story of almost unbearable grief — of young couples who died together, of shrapnel piercing toddlers' flesh, of people who will love no more.

The cycle of violence continues and keeps them living in fear. Even in California yesterday, at the end of Passover, a gunman enters a synagogue to wreck the lives of worshipers. He kills and injures for what, for whom?

What a way to live! How can the cycle of violence be stopped? The followers of Jesus were asking about what they could do to change their system because this is what Jesus asked them to do again and again.

What did he say? What was this peace, this new life about? Listen to what New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, said about Jesus' teaching.

“The spiritual journey, in Christianity as well as non-Christian forms, is about the hatching of the heart, the opening of the self to the reality of the Spirit. This opening begins the process by which the self at its deepest level is reoriented and transformed.”

Jesus came with the gift of the Spirit, the Spirit who, still today, opens the heart and brings forth mercy, peace, tolerance, and understanding. That was really what Jesus hoped would happen after his death. He hoped that his followers would experience him with them as they were reoriented and transformed to bring “life” after death.

They learned and we hope to learn from our reading that, as Dr. Borg continues to teach us, “The Christian life is not about pleasing God, the finger-shaker and judge. It is not about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present

that begins to change everything now. Spirituality is about this process: the opening of the heart to the God who is already here.

This “new life” for us, this abundant life, eternal life, begins now as we allow our eyes to be opened to new truth, new understandings that can change us, transform us. May it be so.

We close this meditation with a prayer from Psalm 118:

You, O loving Presence, have been my strength,

You have stood beside me in the darkness,

You have walked with me into the light!”

I shall not give in to fear, but I shall live in peace and give witness to your saving grace.

You turned your face from my weakness and you opened the door leading to new life.

Yes, you opened to me the gates of truth and justice that I might enter through them.

Praise be to you, O Merciful One!

This is the gate to Life; those who know Love shall enter through it.

We give thank to you, O Beloved One, who answers our prayers and invites us to new Life.

Amen.