

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

March 30, 2008

EASTER: PART II

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John 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' ²⁸Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' ²⁹Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

There is a legend concerning the famous singer Enrico Caruso. It seems that one day Caruso entered a bank near the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. He was trying to cash a check. When the alert young teller saw the famous name on the check, he grew

a little suspicious. Having never seen Caruso, but having heard of him, the teller assumed that the famous singer would not have to cash a check like a mere mortal man. And so he questioned the singer's identity. Caruso tried to convince the teller but the more

he tried the more convinced the young man was that the singer was a fraud. Finally Caruso did something better than flash a government issued ID. He stepped back a few paces from the teller's window, placed one hand on his chest, and began to sing an aria. Long before he finished, the teller was counting out his money.

On the *Today Show* last week I noticed that there was a story about The Shroud of Turin. This legendary piece of cloth, supposedly containing the carbon etched figure of the crucified Jesus, is a source of some controversy. A few years ago scientist seemed to have proved it was a fraud, a relic created by someone in the early church. Now some other scientists have developed another test which they believe lends some credence to its authenticity.

Last Sunday night on *60 Minutes*, there was another story about the ossuary of Jesus' brother James. Around seven years ago, there was a lot of talk about the discovery of a burial box that allegedly once contained the remains of James. A man had purchased the box in the mid 1970's in the Old City of Jerusalem for \$200. Soon afterward he uncovered an Aramaic inscription on the box bearing the legend, "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus." The box was touted as the oldest archaeological evidence of Jesus. At the time, people were very excited about the discovery. I think it even made the cover of *Newsweek*. For many believers, this kind of discovery strengthened their faith. It gave them something tangible to support their confidence in Scripture. It was proof that what was written in the pages of the Bible really did happen. As I recall, a couple of months later, a

panel of Hebrew scholars discovered that although the box was indeed an ancient burial box, the inscription was added at a much later date. The burial box was a fake. Now they believe it was deliberately forged along with other so-called relics to make money from believers. Little was said what the discovery of forgery did to the faith of those who wanted proof so they might believe.

Easter is kind of like that for us 21st century Christians. We will not see the Risen Christ for ourselves. We will not be able to poke around at his wounds. We cannot ask him to walk through doors and walls and perform miracles of healing and feeding. Instead Easter comes to us through the account of witnesses, through sermon and song and the written word of Scripture. We are asked simply to hear the word and believe. We are asked to see and believe the Easter story through our faith.

That is sometimes a difficult thing to do. We would prefer some type of proof, something that will bring home the story on a personal level. Perhaps some people may be creative or imaginative enough to hold faith simply by hearing a story. But most of us, I think, would find it much easier to believe if God would make us a witness.

Thank goodness for Thomas! Of all of the characters surrounding the resurrection, Thomas is most like us. He heard the rumors of the Risen Christ but he had not seen anything for himself. He wanted to trust but he could not believe until he had seen for himself and touched the wounds of crucifixion. Thomas needed proof. He needed to

be a witness. "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe!" These are not the words of a man who did not wish to believe. These are the words of a man who did not want to believe too easily. He did not want his belief betrayed. He did not want to invest his trust in a well-intentioned but useless dream.

A week after Thomas became famous for expressing his doubt, Jesus came and stood among all his disciples. He encouraged Thomas to touch his wounds. Thomas did not take Jesus up on the offer. He simply believed. The Risen Christ was now alive not only in words but in real presence. Jesus appeared so that Thomas might believe the Easter story. Thomas believed so that he could prove the Easter story to others who followed.

The last verse in our Scripture lesson this morning is the key. It is perhaps the real end to the gospel of John. John writes, "This has been written in order that you may believe and that through you faith in Jesus Christ you may have life." It seems that the best way for people like us to come to believe in the Easter story is through our experience of Jesus' presence in us and in the worshipping community. Easter faith never would have survived if all we had to believe upon was an empty tomb and a few ghostly appearances of Jesus some 2000 years ago. History is the wrong category for understanding resurrection. It is not a fact to be believed but rather an experience to be shared. It is not one moment in history but the divine power of God which has

the power to transform every moment that is and is yet to come.

Throughout the history of the church, the words of the Easter witnesses have been constantly supported by the actions within the community of faith. Jesus' resurrection was not an event for the world but for his disciples. What mattered was that his life continued through them, and through them his mission was advanced. The resurrected Christ urged his disciples to leave their locked rooms, to continue on with their faith journeys, to break bread together, and to "feed his sheep." In short, he demanded that they show signs of new life in their own life together. They must offer new life so that others may see their ministry as proof of Easter really happening. The church then needs to be a place where one can encounter the reality of resurrection and proclaim it to the world. We need to exhibit new life in what we preach and what we teach, in our fellowship and in our service.

Clarence Jordan, author of *The Cottonpatch Gospels* wrote this: "The crowning evidence that Jesus was alive was not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. It was not a rolled away stone, but a carried-away church."

There is an old legend that on the day of Ascension, the angel Gabriel, the ancient messenger of God, was the first to greet Jesus as he prepared to sit at the right hand of God. "Greetings, Son of God," the angel said. "Is your work on earth completed?" Jesus replied, "Actually it isn't. In fact the work of the building of the Kingdom of God on earth has just begun." Gabriel was quite surprised. He questioned Jesus, "Just begun? If your work on earth has just

begun, what are you doing here?" Jesus answered confidently, "Don't worry. I have left the work of the building of the Kingdom in the hands of those who follow." Gabriel gulped. "You mean men and women? Isn't the work of the Kingdom too difficult for mere men and women?" Jesus answered, "What other choice do we have?"

A Chicago area minister named Wyuetta Bullock uses a wonderful expression to describe Easter faith. She said that believing in the resurrection by living life, is "facing contradictions with God-given confidence." That is essential what Jesus called Thomas to do. Easter faith demands that we hear the story and believe in an almost unbelievable thing: we now live in a new world that is being changed by God. Easter faith teaches us that our lives are not isolated and resurrection is not a solitary activity. It comes to be in community, it is passed on in the faith stories of others, it is heard in what others say and is seen in what others do.

Like Thomas, we may prefer proof. But God has given us more than an historical relic or mere words on a page. We have the Spirit fueled fellowship of the community of the Risen Christ. Here new life comes to us. Here we can believe because of what we feel and what we experience. Here we can be the evidence of resurrection faith and belief in others.