

## Expect Wonders

Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

It's hard to believe but we made it through another Holy Week, a holy week where we found ourselves behind closed doors. Through the portal of Zoom on Thursday night we experienced the sadness of Gethsemane. At noon on Friday we mourned the death of Jesus.

We zoomed together last Sunday and experienced the elation and joy of an empty tomb and the resurrected Christ. Christ is victorious over death. Let the songs of triumph be sung.

So now what? Is that it? Or is there more yet to come?

Let us pray. *—Lord God, be with us this day as we continue to celebrate the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. Let the light of your love flood into our lives and through us to all those who have been captured by darkness, that your light may give them healing, freedom and hope. As we witnessed the appearance of Jesus to Mary, and the good news she brought to the disciples, let us remember that this good news still exists for us today. Darkness does not win. Death is not victorious. Christ is Risen. Amen.*

Our Gospel message this morning brings us to that dark Sunday night after the tomb of Jesus is found to be empty. The scene is one where we find the disciples hiding in the same upper room in which only a few days prior they had shared the Passover supper with Jesus. In spite of Mary's words "I have seen the Lord" the disciples dismiss her testimony as nonsense and conflict fills their gathering.

The Beloved disciple went to the tomb and came back a believer that Christ was indeed risen from the dead. Peter went to the tomb and in his evidence based mindset could only ponder why the linens from Christ's body were positioned the way they were in the tomb.

There was no song of triumph being sung in that upper room. The disciples fear the threat of arrest by the Judean authorities. They fear the uncertainty of an unpredictable future. They ponder if they will be harmed by the strangers in the streets. They wonder where they will get enough food to last another day. They ask themselves how they will ever be able to safely travel back to their families, back to their homes.

During this coronavirus pandemic does all of this sound too, too familiar to you? This past week did you feel fearful for your health as a person outside of your immediate household violated your six foot safety zone?

How did your grocery store foray go this week? Did you don mask and gloves as you traveled the store's aisles to snatch up that last loaf of bread and package of toilet paper? Personally, I've given up trying to find hand sanitizer and sterile wipes or an open appointment slot for Instantcart and the other services that will do your shopping for you.

Have you experienced or do you know of someone who because of the pandemic lost their job and just don't have the funds to purchase food, put fuel in their car or pay the rent? As Governor Mill said this week "It's really difficult to shelter in place when you don't have a roof over your head to shelter under."

Just in the past two weeks I have had people share with me stories of postponed weddings, canceled family reunions, rescheduled graduations and delayed funeral services. One of our church members shared with me the pain of social isolation they are experiencing. I talked to one of our congregation who is presently out of state and wonders if they will be able to return to Maine this summer. These postponements and cancelations and rescheduled events and general unknowing have been painful and grief filled for all of us - a grief that we are forced to experience alone behind closed doors.

In a similar way the disciples in our Gospel lesson are also grief stricken. They grieve the unfulfilled promise of Passover and wonder was Jesus really the Lamb of God sent to set them free. Their mission has failed; their Master has died a criminal's death. They grieve the death of their friend and the loss of meaning for their lives. They experience the grief of shame as they remember their inability to stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane and their fear that caused them to deny Jesus on Good Friday.

Overwhelmed by the events of the past days that have made their lives seem so impossible they experience a crisis of faith, they find themselves terrified, behind a locked door,

But when things seem the most impossible, is exactly when our Lord of endless possibilities takes over and does His best work. Jesus burst onto that scene of impossibility and we find him doing the impossible when he walks through that unopened locked door into their midst.

Jesus doesn't come to the disciples to chastise them for their lack of faith. Jesus doesn't come to them to shame them for their failure to carry on His mission. Jesus doesn't even come to rebuke Peter for his triple denial that Jesus is Lord. Jesus comes to the disciples to offer them a life of new possibilities that were beyond all they could imagine or hope for.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus came and stood amongst them, breathed upon them and *offers them peace*. Jesus comes and meets them where they *are* in that moment – behind a locked door of fear and diminished faith, and offers them a peace that surpasses all of their understanding. He offers them the power of His Holy spirit to guide them and equip them for the next phase of their journey.

Jesus next shows the disciples the nail prints in His hands and the spear wound in His side, not to shame the disciples because of their faltering belief, but so by their *seeing* they might *believe* in the promises of God and come to experience a joyful revelation of faith that just minutes ago seemed so impossible. When they recognize the Risen Savior in their midst they *rejoiced* in the Lord. What a joyous reunion that must have been as they sang the song of triumph “Christ is risen from the dead!”

However, our Lord of endless possibilities won’t allow that song of victory to mark the end of this epic story. Jesus doesn’t want that Easter celebration to remain just with those in that upper room. Our Lord commissions those disciples to spread the good news of His Gospel to all the nations with His words “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*”

But our Risen Savior doesn’t stop there –the scriptures tell us that with His words of commissioning “He breathed on them and said to them “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The disciples receive the Holy Spirit and with that breath of Jesus, their conflicts were gone, their despair was ended, they were created anew, and for the first time in their lives through their *belief* they saw the presence of the living God. Let me say that again, for the first time in their lives through their *belief* they truly realized the presence, the promise, the amazing grace of Jesus Christ.

But a week later we find them still hiding in that upper room rather than spreading the Gospel of Jesus. Into their hiding place appears the disciple we know of as “Doubting Thomas” - the disciple who in my mind unjustly gets a bad rap because during the past week he has at least not been hiding behind a closed door. The other disciples proclaim to him “we have seen the Lord” but Thomas tells them he will only believe if he can touch the nail prints in Christ’s hands and the touch the wound in His side – because for Thomas “seeing is believing.” Thomas requires not just the disciples’ words of witness but a ton of evidence to believe that a dead man, Jesus was risen from the dead.

To paraphrase an old saying, if you don’t have faith, then there will never be evidence enough to convince you and if you do have faith, no evidence is needed. *Without faith, no evidence is sufficient; with faith, no evidence is necessary.* And although most of us probably agree with that in principle, we can perhaps admit that sometimes we still search for a little evidence, or a little *more* evidence than we usually have.

Thomas needed indisputable evidence before he could come to believe what was before his very eyes. So Jesus bursts through the closed doors of doubt yet again to bring peace, and breathed His life giving gift of belief into Thomas’ heart.

The disciples through their faith in a Risen Lord were now able to see that God had called them to witness to the endless wonders of a life in Jesus Christ. Their faith in the Risen Savior brought them from the confines of that upper room to minister in places they could never imagine. It was because of his faith in a Risen Savior that Thomas now sees he is called to travel to India to spread the Good News of the Gospel. It is because of his faith in a Risen Savior that Peter now sees he is called to proclaim that Christ is Lord to the evil that is Rome. It is because of their faith in a Risen Savior that James and John now see they are called to minister to the needy and oppressed people of Jerusalem. It is because of their faith in a Risen Savior that they themselves are resurrected to a new life of endless possibilities, new life that put away doubt and came to expect wonders.

I know that we all have doubts at times about our faith in a Risen Christ. My friends, it's okay to have questions, because questions and wonder and doubt are signs of what theologian Paul Tillich calls our "ultimate concern" – that which we really care about – our relationship with God. And it is out of these doubts and questions that faith is born, takes hold and grows. It's out of our relationship with God and each other that faith offers us peace and hope and in turn allows us to see things more clearly.

I think that belief is not so much about proof but is all about relationships. Don't we believe those who we are in a right relationship with? And don't we tend to disbelieve those with whom our relationship is frayed or non-existent? In the upper room we see the disciples move from belief to unbelief because of their frayed relationship with Christ. So in their unbelief they lock the doors to their upper room and to their hearts...

We are all locked up in one way or another. We have deadbolts on our doors. We have caller-id. There are times when we are afraid to go out because we are too ashamed, too depressed, too hard-hearted, too afraid we might be exposed to the coronavirus.

I wonder, what is it that causes you to lock the doors of your heart? What is it that weakens your relationship with the risen Christ? Perhaps it is fear, shame, lack of proof.... or like Thomas do you need your own personal experience of Christ before you can unlock the door of your heart.

That's exactly why Jesus came to the disciples; not once, not twice but three times to strengthen their relationship with Him, a relationship of love to equip them with faith and hope for the rest of their lives. Jesus came to them to carry away their despair and doubts so they may come to expect wonders through a life of faith in Him.

And that's exactly why we come together, albeit these past months electronically - to strengthen our relationship with Christ and each other through our worship, our prayers and the hearing and proclaiming of the Gospel. And just this past week I have witnessed wonders as members of our congregation reached out to one another with the love of Christ through a caring phone call, a written note and even a large bowl of homemade chicken soup – a reaching out that witnesses that Christ lives in us as we offer love and compassion to one another.

This morning be assured that Jesus is in our midst, right here or wherever you are dialing in from. He is in our midst to bring us the peace that surpasses all understanding and calls us to journey from behind our locked doors forward in faith.

Just like the first disciples we can't clearly see the nail prints in His hands through our grief and despair, but as the chorus of the hymn we are about to sing promises

“Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death; victory is ours through God who loves us”

I am here to witness to you that our Lord Jesus lives today and promises us victory in the face of the Coronavirus and all the things of this earth that cause us grief and despair. I pray that through your faith, through your relationships of Christian love, you and others may come to see the living Christ, and experience the wonder of his love.

Let the songs of triumph begin – He lives! Christ is risen from the dead. Alleluia. Amen.