

## First Congregational United Church of Christ, Second Sunday of Easter, April 7, 2024

### John 20:19-31

#### Jesus Appears to the Disciples

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

#### Jesus and Thomas

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So 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."

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." Then 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." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

**The Purpose of This Book** Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

**Message:** *"No Doubt"* Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Pray with me: Take a deep breath...and let it out. Speak to our hearts, risen Jesus, as we go without knowing. We lift our prayers of gratefulness that you are with us even as we juggle our doubts. Amen.

A pastor's kitten climbed up a tree in his backyard and then was afraid to come down. The pastor coaxed, offered treats and warm milk. The kitten would not come down. The tree was not sturdy enough to climb, so the pastor decided that if he tied a rope to his car and pulled the tree, bending it down, he could reach up and get the kitten. And that's what he tried, all the while checking his progress driving slowly away from the tree. He figured if he went just a little bit further, the tree would be bend sufficiently for him to reach the kitten.

In the next move, the rope broke. The tree went 'boing!' and the kitten sailed through the air – out of sight. The pastor felt terrible and walked all over the neighborhood asking people if they'd seen a little kitten. No. Nobody had seen her. So, he prayed, "Dear God, I just commit this kitten to your keeping," and he went on about his business.

A few days later, he was at the grocery store and met one of his church members there. He noticed cat food in her shopping cart. Everyone knew that she wasn't a cat lover, so he asked, "Cat food?" She replied, "You won't believe this," and went on to tell him how her daughter had been begging for a cat, and how she kept refusing. A few days ago, the child begged again, and she told the girl, "Well, if God gives you a cat, I'll let you keep it."

"I watched my child go out into the yard," she said, "And she got down on her knees, and asked God for a cat. Really Pastor, you won't believe this, but I saw it with my own eyes. A kitten suddenly came flying out of the blue sky, with its paws outspread, and landed right in front of her."

This is supposed to be a true story...I doubt it.

Each year on the Sunday after Easter, the focus of the scripture is belief and doubt.

Has anyone seen the movie entitled, "Doubt?" It's not a MUST-SEE movie, but, Meryl Streep, who plays the part of Sister Aloysius, who had been so headstrong, so unwavering in her beliefs and so strict in enforcing the rules... finally concedes: "I have doubts. I have *such* doubts."

We find Thomas thinking that same way: "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." Was it too much to ask? Thomas may have wanted to believe, but he, too, *had his doubts*.

Perhaps his heart was so broken after the crucifixion of Jesus, that he went off by himself and sulked in his own misery and, as a result he was not there when the others encountered the Risen Jesus.

When Thomas finally sees him, Jesus invites him to "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!"

His doubt turns into certainty. Notice that Jesus did not condemn this doubt. Jesus knew that Thomas would need proof of the Resurrection...and Jesus **knew** that Thomas would not be the last one who would want proof!

To each one of us who *walks by faith and not by sight*...the message today is straightforward. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Easier said than done? I know people who say there is no God...who doubt the Resurrection...who believe there is nothing after death...I am thinking that God will enable the doubters among us to believe. Doubt led Thomas to believe...  
doubt is ok...

*Theologian, Frederick Buechner, in his book, Wishful Thinking, (p. 20) writes this:  
...if you don't have any doubts, then, you are either kidding yourself or asleep.  
Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.*

Scripture does not record anyone exactly seeing Jesus rise from the dead...although all four Gospel writers describe what it was like soon after the Resurrection. The fearful and defeated disciples were now empowered to *dare anything* in order to tell the story and people have retold the story for almost 2000 years! The death and Resurrection of Jesus is the centerpiece of our Christian faith.

*The church lives into the reality of the resurrection, of what it means to be a community shaped by the dying and rising of Christ, by the expectation-shattering reality of life victorious over death.  
-Gail O'Day, Professor of Preaching and New Testament, Candler University*

No one saw Jesus' resurrection, **but people see us**. We are HOW Jesus is heard and seen...and just maybe, every so often a flying cat will be seen. Jesus offers himself over and over again to people who long to see him and to those who insist on proof.

In the church, this season of Easter lasts a total of 50 days. The stories in the lectionary during Easter continue to focus on what we believe, now in light of the Resurrection and...and will culminate on Pentecost, May 19<sup>th</sup>, with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

There is a lot of believing yet to come...not only in the scriptures, but here at First Congregational United Church of Christ and wherever we find ourselves starting today. These words of Jesus, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, *so I send you*..." are given to us today by our **still-speaking** God, who knows and loves us and sends us out enabled to believe with no doubt.

Breathe in peace. Breathe out thanks. So be it!

## **Benediction**

The proof of the Resurrection of Christ is not an empty tomb, but we, the Easter people whose *lives* have been transformed and who love and follow Jesus.

The blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer and Comforter is and was and always has been...with us all.

This hour's worship has ended, let our service continue.

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This is my last day among you serving as Interim Pastor for Congregational Life and Outreach Ministries.

Many thanks to all of you! Someone asked me how I will feel tomorrow...I have been thinking about how to answer to that question: I will feel like I have just closed the pages of an amazing book. I will savor my time having read it, learning from it and I will always hold you... all the characters... in my heart.

As Pastor Nick, Pastor Katherine and I have been collaborating this week. It warms my heart with gratefulness that they, along with you all will be *walking by faith* together wherever *God will lead*.

You will all be in my thoughts and prayers, First Congregational United Church of Christ.

I will always remember the "Church of the Open Door." **Open it wider, my friends!**

There are many blessings ahead!

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