

Sermon April 7, 2013 John 20:19-31 "Living Proof"

Today is the first Sunday after Easter...year after year, on the first Sunday after Easter, we hear the story of Thomas who had trouble believing that Jesus had really risen from the dead, even though the other ten disciples told him that Jesus had visited them when he was not with them. Every year we repeat this story... Thomas and his struggle to believe....Every year we hear Jesus' words after he came the next week to provide Thomas the proof he needed: "Blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe."

Most of the Lectionary readings go on a three-year cycle, so that once every three years we may hear a particular reading from a Gospel. But this one is an annual delivery... Perhaps this is because it is so important to the church to have the story of Thomas' path to belief.... Throughout all the years since Jesus' Resurrection, Christians have struggled to believe that it is true, that he really does live.

Gospel-writer John wrote his account years after it had happened, and by then he had probably encountered lots of folks with Thomas' problem, just as we have today... There is much grace in the very existence of this story, but the grace doesn't consist only in the picture of a disciple who missed out and then was given his own hands-on experience when he had trouble believing... The grace also comes in the fact that, when Jesus appeared to his disciples, he did not chastise them for having let him down after his arrest. Instead, he offered them peace and gave them work to do. The work? That of forgiveness. The work of making it so that others can also come to a place where they say, "I have seen the Lord!" The work of living the message of Jesus so that it is believable for others.

Maybe we don't know HOW to be proof of the Living Lord today, perhaps we can identify more with Thomas' doubt than with his proclamation of faith. It may be that we look at our small and limited congregation and wonder what God could ever do through us.

If so, the following perspective may help. Presbyterian preacher/professor Thomas G. Long, in his book, *Whispering The Lyrics*, suggests that we compare to the offerings of modern-day churches the church depicted in the Gospel lesson for today. Here, we get our first glimpse of the disciples gathered together after the resurrection, the first glimpse, in other words, of the church in its earliest days, and, all in all, it is not a very pretty picture. Near the end of his life, Jesus had carefully prepared his disciples to be a devoted and confident fellowship of faith. They were to be a community of profound love with the gates wide open and the welcome mat always out, but here we find them barricaded in a house with the doors bolted shut. They were to be the kind of people who stride boldly into the world to bear fruit in Jesus' name, a people full of the Holy Spirit performing even greater works than Jesus himself (John 14:12), but here we find them cowering in fear, hoping nobody will find out where they are before they get their alibis straight. In short, we see here the church at its worst -- scared, disheartened and defensive. If this little sealed-off group of Christians were to place one of those cheery church ads in the Saturday newspaper, what could it possibly say? "The friendly church where all are welcome"? Hardly, unless one counts locked doors as a sign of hospitality. "The church with a warm heart and a

bold mission"? Actually more like the church with sweaty palms and a timid spirit. Indeed, John's gospel gives us a snapshot of a church with nothing – no plan, no promise, no program, no perky youth ministry, no powerful preaching, no parking lot, nothing. In fact, when all is said and done, this terrified little band huddled in the corner of a room with a chair braced against the door has only one thing going for it: the risen Christ. And that seems to be the main point of this story. In the final analysis, this is a story about how the risen Christ pushed open the bolted door of a church with nothing, how the risen Christ enters the fearful chambers of every church and fills the place with his own life. (*Whispering The Lyrics*, Thomas G. Long, CSS Publishing, 1995)

This is also a story of how the Living Lord enters the fearful, locked chambers of OUR lives, even today, and whispers words of hope and life right in the face of whatever scares or burdens us the most. There is no telling what God can do through all or any one of us!

Jesus said that two things are most important: to love God with all that we have and can, and to love our neighbors - each other - as much as we love ourselves. If we do these two things, we will be living proof that our Lord lives in us.

There is an old story of a Civil War chaplain, who one day happened upon a wounded soldier on the battlefield. The chaplain asked him if he'd like to hear a few verses from the Bible. "No," gasped the wounded man, "but I'm thirsty. I'd rather have some water." The chaplain gave him a drink, then repeated his question.

"No sir," said the wounded man, "not now -- but could you put something under my head?" The chaplain did so, and again repeated his question.

"No thank you," said the soldier. "But I'm cold. Could you cover me up?" The chaplain took off his own coat and wrapped the soldier in it. Afraid by now to ask, he did not repeat his question.

He started to go away, but the soldier called him back. "Look, Chaplain, if there's anything in that Bible of yours that makes a person do for another what you've just done for me, then I think I do want to hear it." (from *The Immediate Word*)

Today, a week after Easter, there is a question for each of us who call ourselves Christian and find ourselves part of the church: Are we living so that it becomes possible for others to believe? Are we allowing our lives to be living proof for someone else?

As we share Jesus' meal, may each of us receive in brand new ways his peace. And then may we go forth on this Sunday after Easter continuing the story of our Lord... May the questions, joys, hardships, and doubts of our lives be met each step of the way by the Lord of life. May our lives echo for someone else the witness of the Gospel of John: "These lives are being lived to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life and peace in his name." May we be living proof as we share the love of our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.