

Sermon April 27, 2014 Easter 2 “Work to Do” John 20:19-31 Psalm 16

Jesus Christ is risen! He is alive! We proclaimed this good news last Sunday, on Easter.

We are blessed that, year after year, on the first Sunday after Easter, we hear the story of Thomas, who struggled to believe 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 give Thomas the proof he needed: “Blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe.”

Question: have our lives been transformed because of last Sunday’s Easter celebration? Perhaps not so that we have noticed... We continue to feel horrified and powerless about the missing jetliner, tensions with Russia over Ukraine, the sunken ferry, the mudslide, and fatal stabbings in schools... Our world seems to be growing less and less peaceful... Several folks in or related to our congregation are having family concerns that weigh heavily, job and health challenges that hit hard; serious money shortages. In other words, there is considerable uncertainty in our days.

Easter happened, Jesus overcame death and by his forgiveness broke the chains of sin binding human life, but it’s easy for us to go through our days as though Easter never happened. Martin Luther, who initiated the Protestant Reformation of the church, was so gloomy and down that his wife accused him of living as though his Lord Jesus was dead, not resurrected. I can relate!

So, a question for us all: What would it take for us to let the Lord Jesus be alive in our lives? What will it take for us to really become “Easter people” so that our lives witness to others that Jesus really is the Way to life? What will it take for us to really DO what we read from Psalm 16: “I keep the Lord always before me; because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure...You, God, show me the path of life. In your presence is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” (Ps. 16:8-9, 11)

A man made an appointment to see his pastor. When they met, the man said quietly, “I don’t think I can believe in God any longer. For the last ten years, I have been deeply involved in the life of this church. I have served as an officer, worked on the building, even taught an adult Sunday School class. I have read my Bible, given money faithfully, and tried to be a decent human being. But now I have cancer, and my long-term prognosis does not look good. We had hoped to buy a larger house before long, and of course the kids will need to go through college... Now nothing is making sense, and I don’t see God involved in my life anywhere. It’s as though God forgot about me, or maybe doesn’t care..... I feel really let down by God.”

Easter seemed far away for that man. He could find no evidence at all that God – if God existed or even knew his name.

So what would it take, to get that man to believe in God again? What would be necessary? Suppose you were God, what would you do with him? Heal him of his cancer? Have him win the lottery? Speak quietly to him in the middle of the night, not to frighten him, but to reassure him that

you really were with him?

We are not told that if we follow Jesus we will have no troubles. We are not promised that everything will work out the way we think it should. The Living Lord came to help us train on earth for eternal life with God. This life really is our training ground, Easter would tell us. *It is here that we get to decide whether or not to trust even when we have no evidence, to live out Paul's promise to the Hebrew Christians: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)* If we had all the proof we needed about Easter, about God's love for us, about the life ahead of us, we would never need any faith. We would probably just receive God's love and take it as much for granted as we usually do our air or the water we drink... In such a scenario, we would not offer God any relationship with ourselves, for we would never realize how much we needed God.

Nobody wants hardship or pain, but it is a fact that when we hurt, we tend to come to realize that we need Something beyond ourselves, we need God and other people.

Here is an illustration which speaks to me of God's call to us (individually and as a congregation) in life. A man was sleeping one night in his cabin, when suddenly his room filled with light and God appeared. The Lord told the man he had work for him to do, and showed him a large rock in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the rock with all his might.

So this the man did, day after day. For many years he toiled from sunup to sundown, his shoulders set squarely against the cold, massive surface of the unmoving rock, pushing with all of his might.

Every night the man would return to his cabin sore and worn out, feeling that his whole day had been spent in vain. Since the man was showing discouragement, the Adversary (Satan) decided to enter the picture by placing thoughts into the weary mind: "You have been pushing against that rock for a long time and it hasn't moved even a tiny bit."

Thus, he gave the man the impression that the task was impossible and that he was a failure. These thoughts discouraged and disheartened the man. Satan said, "Why knock yourself out over this? Just put in your time, with minimum effort, and that will be good enough."

That's what the weary man planned to do, but he decided to make it a matter of prayer and take his troubled thoughts to the Lord. "God," he said, "I have worked long and hard in your service, putting all my strength to do that which you have asked. Yet after all this time, I have not even budged that rock by half a millimeter. What is wrong? Why am I failing?"

The Lord responded compassionately, "My friend, when I asked you to serve Me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the rock with all of your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to Me with your strength spent, thinking that you have failed. But is that really so? Look at yourself. Your arms are strong and muscled, your back sinewy and brown; your hands are callused from constant pressure, your legs have become massive and hard. Through opposition you have grown much, and your abilities now surpass those which you used to have. True, you haven't

moved the rock. But your calling was to be obedient and to push and to exercise your faith and trust in My wisdom. That you have done. Now I, my friend, will move the rock." (From CSS Publishing, *Emphasis*)

Sometimes we are a doubting Thomas church - not doubting that Jesus was raised from the dead as much as doubting that God still is right with us, giving us the power and responsibility to feed people and to stand up for what is just and right according to the scriptures. We seem to doubt that we have work to do, that we really ARE called by God to be "Easter People." (*Mention song: "Every morning is Easter morning...Get it straight from the Easter People, God's in charge, spread the word."*)

Jesus told his followers: "You are my witnesses.. Peace I give to you.. Take it into the world, for I send you as my father sent me." This is the task of Easter people. This is the possibility - by God's grace - of every one who would risk following Jesus Christ. This is our commission.

In Alexander Irvine's novel, *My Lady of the Chimney Corner*, the "lady" went to comfort a neighbor whose boy lay dead. She laid her hand on Eliza's head and said, "Ah, wuman, God isn't a printed book to be carried around by a preacher in fine clothes, not a cross dangling at the watch chain of a priest. God takes a hand wherever he can find it... Sometimes God takes a Bishop's hand and lays it on a child's head in benediction, the hand of a doctor to relieve pain, the hand of a mother to guide a child, and sometimes he takes the hand of a poor, old wuman like me to give comfort to a neighbor. But they're all hands touched by His Holy Spirit, and His Spirit is everywhere looking' for hands to use."

So here we are the first Sunday after Easter. We have a big beautiful building with a roof that desperately needs replacing. We have a small congregation with large oil bills. These things are opportunities for us to realize our need for God and opportunities for us to exercise our faith in our Living Lord! We live in a community filled with hurting, struggling people. This is our chance to do what our Lord has asked us to do: "Love one another, as I have loved you." (John 13) How did he love us? Even when we turned our backs on him and betrayed him and denied knowing him, even when we killed him on a cross, our Lord offered forgiveness and second chances and help for us that continues even today!

"I keep the Lord always before me; because God is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure...You, God, show me the path of life. In your presence is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Ps. 16:8-9, 11)

By the grace and power of God, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Guide, we have work to do!  
Thank God! Amen.