

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 26, 2020

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRD SUNDAY of EASTER

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: We have entered this place in confident expectation.
All: **Let us be open to the One who greets us here.**
One: Let us praise our God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.
All: **Glory and honor to the One whose Spirit we receive.**
One: In Christ, we are born anew to a living hope.
All: **In the Spirit's blessing, we know true peace.**

***OPENING HYMN** "That Easter Day with Joy Was Bright" GtG 254

1. **That Easter day with joy was bright;
the sun shone out with fairer light
when, to their longing eyes restored,
the apostles saw their risen Lord.**
2. **He bade them see his hands, his side,
where yet the glorious wounds abide,
the tokens true which made it plain
their Lord indeed was risen again.**
3. **From every weapon death can wield,
your own redeemed forever shield;
O Lord of all, with us abide
in this our joyful Easter-tide.**

***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**God, you have made known to us the ways of life.
Yet, too often, we put other things above you
and turn away from the ways of life
and toward the ways of death.
Forgive us and guide us back into your presence,
that we may know the fullness of joy. Amen.**

***SILENT CONFESSION**

*ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: As God raised Jesus, we too are lifted up from death to experience new life.

All: Let hearts be glad and tongues rejoice, for God's mercy abounds, and our salvation is already assured.

One: We are a forgiven people, called to forgive others. It is our inheritance to live together in hope.
The peace of Christ be with you.

All: And also with you.

*RESPONSE OF PRAISE "We Are Forgiven" GtG 447

**We are forgiven. We are forgiven.
Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.**
(Repeat)
(Public Domain)

THE WORD

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Guiding God,
send your Holy Spirit upon the reading of your Word
that it may serve to show us the path of life
and lead us into your presence
where there is fullness of joy. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

JOHN 20:19-31 *(New Revised Standard Version+)*

Our scripture reading comes from the Gospel of John. The story we read begins, as John tells the story, the evening of the first Easter, after Peter and the other disciple have seen the empty tomb, and after Mary Magdalene has met the Risen Jesus and reported her experience to the disciples.

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² And with that he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If 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. ²⁵ 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."

²⁶ A week later the disciples were together again indoors, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."
³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

SERMON "In Doubt. In Presence. In Peace." by Pastor Bill Vincent

Questions. Uncertainty. Doubt.

Do we go back to life as normal? Or do we hunker down still more?

How do I know I've been exposed to the virus? Where will my next meal come from?

Is it really all that bad? Are people really taking this seriously enough?

Who knows? Who knows?

And is that maybe the real crux of our uncertainty and anxiety and doubt?

Who knows?

All the questions. All the uncertainty. All the doubt.

And then enter the story about 'doubting Thomas', who has his own uncertainty and his own questions.

(Talk about timing.)

Thomas had been with Jesus, like the others, throughout his ministry. Thomas had also witnessed the trial, the crucifixion, the death.

But now he has heard from the others some wild, cockamamie story about Jesus being alive again.

And he's not so sure about this. Probably just like you and I would have been.

'What evidence do you have to back up this story? Where's the proof?'

You can't blame him for having his questions, for not taking the others' word at face value. Sometimes we're not sure we believe it all either.

What strikes me most about this story is that Jesus does NOT chide Thomas for his questions, for his uncertainty, for not taking the other disciples at their word.

Jesus comes to Thomas; Jesus actually gives Thomas exactly what he requests, which is actually no more than what the other disciples received the first time Jesus showed up.

Oh, Thomas may still have had to wait for a whole week (and how long have we been waiting?). Thomas may have been left with his doubts for what seemed to him an interminable amount of time.

Still, Jesus honors Thomas, by coming to him and facing Thomas' doubts squarely, saying,

"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side."

'Here it is. Here is the proof you asked for'.

In other words, Jesus says to Thomas, 'Here I am. You know me, you know who I am -- see the marks? Here I am'.

But then notice: despite Thomas' insistence to

"put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side,"

when given the opportunity to do exactly that, there is nothing in the text that suggests he actually did it: nothing to suggest he actually put his hand in Jesus' side or placed his finger in the *"mark of the nails."*

It's as if, when Thomas came face to face with the presence of Jesus, nothing else mattered.

In the presence of his Lord, Thomas experiences, not the denial or rebuke of doubt, but the actual honoring of it.

And his doubt appears to fade away.

But if Thomas experiences his leap to faith through the experience of the presence of Jesus, then where does that leave you and me -- we who are one of those many people (blessed, supposedly) who have not seen, yet...will we believe?

True, we do not see.

But how can we, how DO we, where will we experience the presence of Jesus?

In you and you and you and me. We are where we, and others, experience the presence of Jesus.

And don't be surprised by that. For the passage actually suggests some ways how that can happen.

We can experience the very presence of Jesus -- we can *be* that presence --
...in the stories we tell about him,
...in the forgiveness we offer through him,
...in the ministry we engage in 'as' him.

Briefly, let me just touch on each one in their turn.

We can experience the very presence of Jesus in the stories we tell about him,

These things are written so that you will believe... (v.31)

John summarizes.

"Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear" one hymn says it.

And another hymn:

*I love to tell the story;
For those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting*

To hear it, like the rest.

There is power in these stories. And as we share them -- retell them for ourselves, for each other, for all who will listen -- we recognize the power of the Word -- God's word -- which is written in human words, yes, and spoken in human words, yes, and embodied in human flesh, yes.

And the one about whom we speak -- he himself comes alive in the telling, and we sense his presence with us.

We can experience the very presence of Jesus in the forgiveness we offer through him. Now I admit this one can be tricky. 'How are you to forgive me?' I get that. Still, let us be clear: it is part of our commission.

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Now, that business about 'retaining the sins of any' -- I really don't think we need to put much effort into 'retaining the sins of any'; because (I'm afraid) we do that already, and we do it too easily. We nurse a grudge. We hold something against someone. We carry a chip on our shoulder.

'Retaining the sins of any' -- withholding forgiveness -- is easy.

'Forgiving the sins of any' -- that's hard. For me to actually forgive takes my giving up the anger I feel over some injury, my letting go of the pain and disappointment I know due to some wrong or failure, even when I'm the one I need to forgive.

But when that happens -- when forgiveness truly happens -- I promise you: those involved will know the presence of Christ in their midst.

I remember the experience once with a friend. He was feeling low and blue, terrible about himself and something he had done. And when he had finished sharing, pouring his heart out and sharing his shame, I felt moved to say something like, "I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." Now, don't get me wrong: I was not trying to be 'pontifical' in how I said it; not looking down on him as I said it. Remember: this is the very message we have heard and are called to share. And when he heard those words, it was like this terrible load had been lifted from him. His countenance changed. He sat up straighter. He had been released, freed; he knew he had been forgiven. And in that moment, he and I both knew the presence of Christ with us.

We can experience the very presence of Jesus in the ministry we engage in 'as' him.

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." he said.

Charles Cousar notes for us that

Though the word "church"...does not appear in the Fourth Gospel, from beginning to end the narrative makes clear that the Christian community finds its model and mandate in Jesus himself. ... The text reminds the...community that it is rooted in and continues the ministry of Jesus. (Texts, 271-272)

Continues his work of healing and preaching, teaching and touching (even the untouchables).

Remember 'incarnation'? that big word, meaning 'in the flesh'. If we, as the church, are to "continue the ministry of Jesus," then we are (literally) to "flesh out" his work and his

mission, his calling and commission. The apostle Paul would say that we now are the body of Christ: we are his flesh, we re-present him.

Incarnation. In the flesh. Present. Here and now. Face to face. You and me. Even the 'you's and 'me's who doubt. For this whole story is about one who doubted. And in his story -- in Thomas -- we experience the presence of Jesus.

I know, I know: Still we worry about things, and life.

And to be quite honest, to experience the presence of Christ with us does not answer all our questions, does not dispel all our uncertainty.

But...

Remember how Jesus greeted the disciples, even as they

"were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities"?

Remember the first thing he said to them, both times?

"Peace be with you."

Peace: this from the one with nail-scars in his hands and a spear wound in his side.

Peace: from the one crucified, but now raised from the dead.

Cameron Murchison, [Dean of Faculty, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia] affirms for us that

the promise of peace...supplies courage.... It applies at every point where we fear that God's goodwill for the world's well-being is a pious dream, out of touch with the chaos and hatred of everyday life. For the one who offers the words of peace is the very one who has endured the brunt of that chaos and hatred, yet now stands in their midst—risen, indeed! (Feasting:Theological)

This is the one who says "Peace be with you."

And we call to mind what he said earlier to his disciples, that fateful night in the upper room:

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

"I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 14:27, 16:33)

This peace he offers -- this peace we can know because of him, we know in him, we know in his presence.

And we experience his presence in and through each other.

So that I need you to experience his peace and you need me to experience his peace.

So what are we doing to share and embody his peace in the midst of something less than a peaceful time?

Will we give a call to someone we know is alone and lonely?

Will we offer, if we can, to pick up groceries for a friend? or someone who can't do it on their own?

Will we donate to a local food pantry, either money or time?

Will we write a letter, send an email, offer an encouraging word?

Will we drive by and wave, converse across the driveway, order out from a local restaurant?

Jill Duffield, editor The Presbyterian Outlook, writes:

Our Lord and our God, the risen Christ, comes to us giving us hope in the face of fear, peace in the midst of chaos[,] and the ability to believe in life no matter how deadly the circumstances. Equipped with the Spirit, we are sent to share these gifts, [to] be these gifts to the world.

Again, this does not answer all our questions about what we should do; this does not dismiss all our uncertainty regarding all the unknowns.

But I dare to say this: that as we share this peace -- as we seek to share this hope and peace and faith and life with others -- as we give ourselves away in this -- the questions that really don't matter will melt from our minds, and the uncertainties that plague our hearts will be lifted, because we are lifted to new life in the peace and presence and power of our Risen Lord.

So as we re-present his presence, together we can ease the dis-ease experienced by this disease.

And we can remind each other of that peace and hope and faith and life -- and that presence -- every time we tell that story again (and again and again), every time we offer and live out that forgiveness that only comes from the depths of the heart of God, every time we embody Christ and his mission and his love and his presence in the words of grace we speak and the actions of justice we perform and the lives of compassion we live out.

And in doing that, we remind each other -- and the world -- in truth, in this day, in every day -- that he is risen, he is risen indeed!

Amen.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

In life and in death we belong to God.

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,**

**and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

With believers in every time and place,

**we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Resurrecting God,
in a doubting world,
keep us in faith that we may have life.

We pray for the church universal.
Breathe on us your Holy Spirit,
that we may honor and pass on
the great inheritance we have received,
embodying your grace and love and peace.
Keep us in faith that we may have life.

We pray for Mother Earth,
that we may touch her wounds
with healing care and love,
tilling with tenderness the garden that is our home.
Keep us in faith that we may have life.

We pray for the whole world,
its nations, its leaders, and its people,
that your justice may be done,
your mercy may be shared,
and your wisdom and peace may prevail.
Keep us in faith that we may have life.

We pray for all those in need,
the suffering, the oppressed, the ill, the dying,
and all those who care for them,
that the suffering may know respite,
the oppressed may know release,
the ill may know healing,
the dying may know your peace,
and the caregivers may know your sustenance.
Keep us in faith that we may have life.

We pray for ourselves, our families, and those we love,
that we may know your courage
and follow your way
and shine your light.
Keep us in faith that we may have life.

Blessed are you, O God,
who through Jesus Christ, crucified and risen,
and in the community of the Holy Spirit,

gives us an inheritance that is imperishable
and unfading,
now and forever. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Sisters and brothers, we have no good apart from God.
Therefore let us keep God at the forefront of our minds
and give generously from all that we have been given,
that others may also receive
from the fullness of God.

**Doxology GtG 606*

**Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
praise God, all creatures here below;
praise God above, you heavenly host;
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**
(Public Domain)

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Generous God,
you are our portion and our cup.
In you our hearts are glad, our souls rejoice,
and our bodies rest.
Bless and multiply our offerings and pledges
that they may bring the joy of your presence
more deeply into the world. Amen.**

SENDING

***HYMN** “We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight” GtG 817 [Tune: 655]

1. **We walk by faith and not by sight;
with gracious words draw near,
O Christ, who spoke as none e'er spoke;
“My peace be with you here.”**
2. **We may not touch your hands and side,
nor follow where you trod;
but in your promise we rejoice
and cry, "My Lord and God!"**
3. **Help then, O Lord, our unbelief;
and may our faith abound
to call on you when you are near
and seek where you are found.**
4. **And when our life of faith is done,
in realms of clearer light
may we behold you as you are,
with full and endless sight.**

***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Peace be with you as you depart to serve.
Christ sends you out as witnesses to the world.
Christ breathes a blessing on you;
the Holy Spirit fills you with hope and joy.
Wherever you go, God is beside you.
God is a present help in all you do.

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