

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 2021

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**SECOND SUNDAY of EASTER**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

One: Peace be with you as we celebrate resurrection.  
All: **Christ is with us to renew our faith.**  
One: We are here to testify to God's grace.  
All: **We will share our stories and ourselves.**

**\*OPENING HYMN "The Day of Resurrection!" GtG 233**

One: The day of resurrection!  
All: **Earth, tell it out abroad,**  
One: the Passover of gladness,  
All: **the Passover of God.**  
One: From death to life eternal,  
All: **from sin's dominion free,**  
Unison: **our Christ has brought us over**  
**with hymns of victory.**

One: Let hearts be purged of evil  
All: **that we may see aright**  
**the Lord in rays eternal**  
**of resurrection light,**  
One: and listening to his accents,  
may hear, so calm and plain,  
his own "All hail!" and, hearing,  
All: **may raise the victor strain.**

One: Now let the heavens be joyful;  
All: **let earth its song begin;**  
One: the round world keep high triumph  
and all that is therein.

**All: Let all things seen and unseen  
their notes of gladness blend,  
One: for Christ the Lord has risen,  
All: our joy that has no end.**

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**\*UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Dear God, it is so easy to speak the words and not really mean them. It is so easy to voice the right phrases and lack the conviction behind them. It is so easy to say we believe and not know what we are talking about. Forgive us, O God, when we give lip service to you and leave ourselves behind. Make our faith deep and true. Bind us -- heart, mind, and soul -- to you. Make us your people in the image of your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

**\*SILENT CONFESSION**

**\*ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: We have an advocate with God—  
Jesus Christ, the righteous one—  
who offered his life in love  
to save the world from sin.  
This is the good news of the gospel:  
in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

**\*THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

**All: And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)*

**THE WORD**

**SCRIPTURE READINGS** Deuteronomy 34:1-6  
John 20:24-31

Deuteronomy 34:1-6 (Common English Bible)

*<sup>1</sup> Then Moses hiked up from the Moabite plains to Mount Nebo, the peak of the Pisgah slope, which faces Jericho. The Lord showed him the whole land: the Gilead region as far as Dan's territory; <sup>2</sup> all the parts belonging to Naphtali along with the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, as well as the entirety of Judah as far as the Mediterranean*

Sea; <sup>3</sup> also the arid southern plain, and the plain—including the Jericho Valley, Palm City—as far as Zoar.

<sup>4</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses: “This is the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when I promised: ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have shown it to you with your own eyes; however, you will not cross over into it.”

<sup>5</sup> Then Moses, the Lord’s servant, died—right there in the land of Moab, according to the Lord’s command. <sup>6</sup> The Lord buried him in a valley in Moabite country across from Beth-peor. Even now, no one knows where Moses’ grave is.

John 20:24-31 (Common English Bible)

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> The other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

<sup>26</sup> After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!”

<sup>28</sup> Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

<sup>29</sup> Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who do not see and yet believe.”

<sup>30</sup> Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples’ presence, signs that are not recorded in this scroll. <sup>31</sup> But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

**SERMON** “Living Thomases” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Imagine Thomas that week in between. We know how the story ends, what happens. But during that week (if we can put ourselves in his position) Thomas did not. He did not know that his Lord would appear to him, too, to remove all doubt. On Monday through Saturday of that week, he did not know.

Our lives may at times mirror Thomas's experience.

There may be times, like when Thomas was finally granted his desire, when we can exclaim with clarity and confidence, “My Lord and my God!” The confidence of our first hymn:

**The day of resurrection!**

**Earth, tell it out abroad**

And there may be times, like the week in between, when we simply do not know. When questions abound and doubt dogs our steps. And even though we yearn to know and claim the faith with confidence, we simply cannot. It is beyond us.

This believing, this faith business is not cut and dry, not pure and simple certainty. But one part certainty, one part – on another day, 5 parts – doubt, questioning, uncertainty.

Some days we are like the other disciples – “*We have seen the Lord!*” – with clarity of vision and certainty of faith ringing in our voices.

And on other days we are more like Thomas that week between, having heard what others have said, and not sure what to make of it all.

Presbyterian pastor John Rogers describes this landscape of our lives in terms of another story: Moses on Mt. Nebo. Mt. Nebo, where Moses died, representing the longing from afar and never having, yearning yet never possessing, wanting to know yet never knowing for certain. Rogers writes,

**I am talking about the spiritual occupants of Mount Nebo ... the experience of many people today who do not know if they are to call themselves Christians at all, but who are saddened in their feeling of being outside the Promised Land ... Moses on Mount Nebo is a man in the situation of many of us who feel we must, in some measure at least, confess and serve a faith whose gifts...of assurance and certainty are not given in the abundance we might desire. ... The people of Nebo are the obedient children of both faith and doubt, of confession and denial. ... [those who] sometimes...must envision with our minds what our hearts cannot yet confirm - must see and affirm with one another what we personally have not been given the grace to celebrate in actual life - must perhaps be willing to hear and to confess and to sing of God's steadfast love and faithful care even when we don't "feel" it. ("The Language of Zion and the Longing of Nebo" Davidson College Presbyterian Church, October 10, 1976)**

Sometimes the real spawning ground of faith is in the trackless waste of the wilderness, outside the Promised Land.

Sometimes faith is born, not of crystal clear sight, but of straining to see through the mist and the fog, catching maybe a glimpse, and then taking a risk and stepping out...in faith.

And we pray that God would open our eyes, at the same time we confess that we do not see.

Perhaps there is a faith that knows for certain; and there is a faith that strives for certainty, with its goal often beyond reach.

These two are related to each other; "kissing cousins," if you will, in the family of faith. And both are honored by God.

Frederick Buechner describes it well when he speaks of the experience of prayer. He reminds us of the story of the father who brings his son to Jesus to be healed and cries out in anguish, “*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*” (Mark 9:14-29) Buechner continues,

**What about when the boy is not healed? When, listened to or not listened to, the prayer goes unanswered? Who knows? Just keep praying, Jesus says. ...**

**Even if the boy dies, keep on beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat with even your most half-cocked and halting prayer the God you call upon will finally come, and even if [God] does not bring you the answer you want, [God] will bring you [God]self. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for. (Wishful Thinking, p.71)**

That presence. The presence of God even when we're unsure.

Now despite the fact that Moses longed for yet never possessed, one thing that stands out for me in the story is that though he died outside the promised land on Mt. Nebo, yet he did not die alone. God was with him, even when he did not feel God was there.

Even though, in that upper room, a blessing is bestowed upon those who believe even though they have not seen, still Thomas also was blessed in his own way: blessed with “**an uncompromising honesty**” as William Barclay puts it.

**There is more ultimate faith in the [person] who insists on being sure than in the [one] who glibly repeats things which [they have] never thought out, and which [they do] not really believe. (William Barclay, p.276-77)**

Some would call this doubting and questioning not a blessing but a curse. Perhaps it is best termed a blessing deferred.

Hold on to that notion. For the God whom we seek also seeks us. The God whom we yearn to hold onto has laid claim to us and holds onto us.

You might remember the story of Ben and Carol Weir. Ben Weir, Presbyterian minister, was kidnapped and held hostage for over 400 days in Lebanon. Carol Weir worked and prayed to get him released. She writes of that agonizing time,

**That summer I got over the sense that I had to make myself holy and presentable to God in order to pray. Rather, I presented myself to God as I was, completely dependent, uncertain, weak, full of doubts and fear; hope against hope, faith in search of faith. When I found it hard to hold on to God, God held on to me. (Hostage Bound, Hostage Free, p.86)**

She could lay claim to that truth...at least after the fact.

And then there are those moments – sometimes very fleeting – when, after we have struggled and waited, the object of our yearning comes to us, no matter how briefly, and says, "Peace be with you."

Then, in the glow of that revelation, we can carry on, yearning for another moment like that, somewhere along the way, another glimpse.

And so too with Thomas. He may not have understood during that week. He may have disbelieved and thought it all poppycock, these stories of the others having seen his crucified Master alive again. But there were other stories and memories and moments to which he could, and did, cling. Memories of Jesus's words. Memories of the power of his healing. Memories of

that last evening together in the upper room. And he continued to cling to those memories and moments, and did so in the midst of the community of faith...and even the community of doubt.

Thomas stayed in the community of believers, even as he struggled to believe. This serves as a good guide for us, a reminder to us not to desert the community when our faith seems weak or non-existent. But it means, too, we must help to carry each other and support each other; we must be willing to welcome the melody of faith and the harmony of doubt – even if that harmony be in a minor key.

For at one time or another in our lives, we may be singing either part.

At one time or another, our lives may be spent in that upper room with clarity and certainty; and at other times we may be stranded during the week between, clouded by doubt and uncertainty.

But know this: no matter when we reside at any point during our lives, we do always abide in the presence of God.

So we may believe, even as we struggle to believe.

For Christ is with us, when we see him clearly standing before us, and even when we see him not.

#### **\*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**

**Pastor:** Pour out your blessing, O Lord;

**People:** send us your Spirit of peace.

#### **THE LORD'S PRAYER** *(Traditional)*

**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*

*Reflection*

*\*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Holy God, we give you thanks and praise  
for light and life and love, and—above all—  
the presence of the living Lord among us.  
By your Spirit who breathes within us,  
strengthen our faith, use our gifts,  
and work in our lives to bear witness  
to the resurrection of Christ our Lord,  
in whose name we pray. Amen.**

## SENDING

**\*CLOSING HYMN** “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” GtG 833

One: O Love that wilt not let me go,  
**All: I rest my weary soul in thee;**  
One: I give thee back the life I owe,  
**All: that in thine ocean depths its flow  
may richer, fuller be.**

One: O Light that followest all my way,  
**All: I yield my flickering torch to thee;**  
One: my heart restores its borrowed ray,  
**All: that in thy sunshine's blaze its day  
may brighter, fairer be.**

One: O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
**All: I cannot close my heart to thee;**  
One: I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
**All: and feel the promise is not vain  
that morn shall tearless be.**

One: O Cross that liftest up my head,  
**All: I dare not ask to fly from thee;**  
One: I lay in dust life's glory dead,  
**All: and from the ground there blossoms red  
life that shall endless be.**

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**\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

**People: ...Amen.**

**POSTLUDE**

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