

## Message for April 24, 2022

### **John 20:19-31**

It was the evening of the very first Easter Sunday and ten of the original twelve disciples had gathered together in a room somewhere in Jerusalem. Judas of course was not present since, full of remorse for his betrayal of Jesus, he had died by his own hand. And as for Thomas, the other missing disciple? No one knew where he was. Perhaps he was full of disgust and had had enough of everything after what had happened during the past forty-eight hours. There was certainly enough to be disgusted about too. After all they, the disciples, had been Jesus' closest followers for the past three years. They had known him as no others had. They had seen his miracles, heard his parables, and had even thought that he was the Messiah himself but now it all seemed to be so foolish. Far from inaugurating the kingdom of God here on earth and ruling in glory, Jesus had been betrayed by one of his own followers, arrested, tried, and then executed in the most shameful way imaginable. And when the crisis had struck, all of them with the exception of the beloved disciple, had failed Jesus. Even Peter, who was nicknamed 'the rock', had failed Jesus when he denied ever knowing him three separate times. It was all so shameful and as if all of that wasn't bad enough, there was what had happened following Jesus' death.

Normally the bodies of convicted criminals were thrown into the garbage dump to be devoured by the carrion birds and scavenger animals. This is what would have happened to Jesus' body too if it hadn't been for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. They weren't even followers of Jesus but unlike the disciples, they had had the courage to claim Jesus' body and give it a decent burial. Overwhelmed by fear, the disciples had abandoned Jesus in his time of need and even now, two days later, they were still petrified with fear. The authorities had shown no hesitation in killing Jesus so who was to say that they wouldn't come after them as well?

It had seemed as if things couldn't possibly get any worse, but it did as there was also a strange story making the rounds that Jesus wasn't really dead, he had been resurrected. Mary Magdalene had even claimed that she had seen Jesus and spoken with him! The disciples couldn't believe that it was true, and indeed they weren't even sure that they wanted it to be true. Just suppose for a

moment that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that he came looking for them. In light of the way that they had all acted towards him, what would he say or do? The disciples then cowered in the room, dreading what might happen next. Might there be a knock at the door and then the voice of the one that they had failed so miserably demanding entrance? Or even, might there be a knock at the door and then the stern voice of authorities demanding entrance, telling them that they were now under arrest?

There was no knock at the door. Instead, Jesus himself was suddenly standing there amidst them. But if Jesus' appearance was a miracle, what he said was even more so. "Peace be with you!" he said, and just to make sure that they got the point, he said it again. After that he breathed upon them and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. And as for the disciples, they could hardly believe it! Jesus truly was alive again and he had even forgiven them! Far from casting them off, Jesus would still use them to fulfill his ministry here on earth! Truly it is no wonder that they were, as John puts it, overjoyed.

Thomas however was absent while all this was going on. When he finally returned, the others wasted no time in telling him what had happened, but Thomas was sceptical to say the least saying, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my hand into his side, I will not believe!" But why was Thomas so sceptical?

The usual answer is that Thomas found the whole concept of the resurrection just too hard to believe. Why everyone knows that dead people simply don't come back to life! There is truth to this explanation, but I also believe that something else was going on too. I don't doubt that Thomas, like the others, was weighed down by grief, guilt, and shame. The last person that he wanted to see was Jesus and then, when the other ten disciples said that they had not only seen Jesus but that he had forgiven them and entrusted his ongoing ministry to them, it was just too good to be true. Thomas probably wanted to believe but he couldn't. One week later though when all of the disciples had gathered together once again, Jesus joined them a second time and the first thing that Jesus did was say to Thomas, "Peace be with you!" Now all of Doubting Thomas' doubts could be laid to rest. The other disciples had told the truth! Jesus really had been raised! Jesus really had forgiven him and the others for their failures and shortcomings! Jesus really had entrusted his on-

going ministry into their hands, but what is the point of this trip down the Bible's memory lane?

Simply that the disciples' story is our story. We too have been called to be the disciples of Christ. Like the original twelve, we too have heard his teaching and know what he desires of us. Like the first disciples, we too know who and what Jesus is and yet, so often like them, we also fail him and let him down. Sometimes we fail to love both God and others. Sometimes we are oblivious to the presence and working of God in our lives and in the life of the world around us. Sometimes we too are filled with fear and are reluctant to proclaim who and what we are, the disciples of Christ, in what is sometimes a hostile world. And if we are honest about it, many of us sometimes have our doubts. In the face of heartache, suffering and pain, we may doubt God's goodness and care. In the face of death, we may doubt that there is a life yet to come. Indeed if we are experiencing what Marty Martin called, "the dark night of the soul", then we may even doubt the reality of God himself. Yes, sometimes we may be sorry excuses of disciples but even so, Jesus still comes to us with his wonderful words of love and grace. As one person has said:

"There's no vow you can break, no good intention that you can fail to carry out, that he cannot forgive. If he rose and returned and forgave his disciples, he can forgive anybody."

He can and he does forgive anybody and everybody, including each one of us, despite all of our failures and shortcomings. All can be forgiven, and this is what sets us free to live our lives without being weighed down by guilt, fear, or the past. That we are set free is one of the great promises of Easter. Indeed the great news of Easter is that we aren't just set free from the power of sin and death, we are even set free to be the church. Is the church, including this congregation, perfect? Of course not! The church never has been nor ever will be perfect, but as William Willimon once wrote:

"That Easter evening could be said to be the birth of the church, the foundation for our gathering here this morning. Who is the church? A bunch of people who make promises to serve Jesus, to be a part of his reign, to witness to him and to work with him and then stumble, fall away, backslide, deceive, and cowardly disappoint him and ourselves. That's the church. And then he returns to us and says 'Peace'. He forgives us, breathes his Holy Spirit upon us, even

us, and once again we are able to pick ourselves up, take a deep breath and follow him. That's the church."

This is as good a description of the church, including every congregation, as any. In fact this is the story of all of Christ's disciples going all the way back to the very first ones: messing up time after time, breaking promises, full of good intentions that all too often have stayed just that, good intentions. Even so, the wonderful promise of Easter is that we are still loved, forgiven, and redeemed. This is what enables us to not give into feelings of despair and hopelessness. This is what enables us to carry on and persevere. Easter isn't just about what will happen after we pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Easter is also about our lives here and now. For good and for bad, the first disciples' story is our story too, but in good and in bad, Jesus' great words of love, hope and promise to them are also his words to us as well. "Peace be with you".

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this spring morning, one week after Easter. We thank you for what we celebrated last Sunday and still remember today; the resurrection of your Son with all its meaning and implications, that through your love we have life in all of its fullness, now and forevermore.

On this spring morning we thank you for the life returning to your creation such as the sound of the birds, the growing greenness of the grass, the shoots in the gardens, and the early buds on the trees. Truly, when seen through the eyes of faith, the natural world around us speaks of you and your presence.

On this first Sunday after Earth Day, we do not just give you thanks for the beauty, wonder and goodness of your creation, but we also offer up our prayer for its well-being. Help us to come to grips with the growing threat of climate change with its potentially dire implications, not only for us but for all forms of life everywhere. Help us to remember that this is your world and not ours. Grant us the wisdom, courage, and strength to do what ought to be done to avert an

ecological catastrophe. Grant too that your creation may be all the better for our being a part of it.

We offer up our prayer this morning for the sake of all the people around us as the pandemic continues. We pray for healing in the lives of those who are ill and comfort for those who grieve.

We pray this day for all who are struggling to get by as the interest rates and inflation rates continue to rise. We pray for all the businesses and institutions, including your church, that are struggling to cope with the many changes brought about by the pandemic; living, working, and ministering in a world that is now so different from what was a mere two years ago.

As we have so often lately, we once again offer up our prayer for the nation and the people of Ukraine. We witness the barbarity and atrocities, the plight of countless people forced from their homes, and we wonder how this can possibly be happening. We pray then for the restoration of peace and security. We pray too for justice and righteousness; that those responsible for the atrocities and suffering will be held accountable. And as all of this happens, help us to remember that while you are the God of love and forgiveness, you are also the God of justice and righteousness. With all of this in mind, we pray for your church and her ministry in the world; that she may fearlessly proclaim your values and do your work.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen