

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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## **“Without is With”**

**A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
Second Sunday of Easter**

**April 15, 2012**

**Acts 4:32–35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1–2:2; John 20:19–31**

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I have to admit, I have an affinity for graveyards at this time of year.  
They seem dormant most of the time, hiding under blankets  
of uniformity, of grayness, of neglect or unkemptness.  
But during spring, during the seasons of Lent and Easter,  
graveyards seem to come into their own, to demand we notice them.  
I normally travel to Winston-Salem every year on the Saturday before Easter  
to help my family, prepare graves for Easter, to meet the Rising Son.  
We come from all over North Carolina, from all over the south,  
those of us who can, to gather in God's Acre, as the Moravian graveyard is called,  
to dress our beloved family members in their Easter finery.  
It's not just *our* Easter clothes that we worry about,  
but also how we will dress them:  
in forsythia, daffodils, and pansies, if Easter comes early;  
or in azaleas, hydrangeas, and lilies, if Easter comes later.  
Decked out in yellow rubber gloves and boots, armed with Ajax, Comet, and Clorox,  
vegetable brushes and toothbrushes, buckets, grass-clippers, coat hangers,  
and wire cutters – and oh, yes, beautiful flowers –  
we gather in the graveyard to visit the graves of  
great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, aunts, and stillborn babies,  
kneeling and scrubbing each headstone,  
to trace with ungloved fingers the etching of each baptismal name,  
to remember the birthdates and death dates,

and note the many causes of death before modern medicine;  
to laugh at the funny things they used to say  
and to tell and hear their good and sad stories – of children born at home,  
of those who died in the flu epidemic of 1918,  
of secret second families among the Cherokees in other states,  
of bedroom slippers that dyed the drinking spring water red,  
of alcoholism that took an early toll,  
of people being “just not right” in the mind.

None of them lived flawless lives,

and certainly none of them lived lives free of suffering and pain,

yet we remember each of them fondly as beloved children of God.

We may be *without them* now, in body, they having crossed over to the other side.

But for Easter, they are very much *with us*, as we bend to them, tend to them,

speak tenderly of them, remember them, clean, address, and anoint

them with the floral fragrances of the season.

Through the Easter event, the paschal mystery of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection,

*without is with*, for those of us who believe that Christ, the Lord, has risen, indeed!

Thomas, the Disciple, is mis-named, I think, in the post-resurrection accounts.

In John’s Gospel, he misses that Easter evening cameo appearance,

where the resurrected Jesus greets the other disciples

with perhaps his customary greeting, “Peace be with you!”

and then willingly extends gashed hands and bares his lashed side for them

before they have to ask, before doubt even has a chance to register.

And then Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit, the Pentecost moment in John’s Gospel,

that still small breath which echoes God’s life-giving breath at creation,

which sends them out of that room called *Without*,

no longer fearful, but overjoyed,

as commissioned apostles now, as enfranchised forgivers,

as entertainers of the possibility that *without* might not be what it at first seems.

Thomas, of course, is not privy to that Easter evening encounter with the Risen Lord,  
or to the imparting of the Holy Spirit  
and its gift of a continued assurance of Jesus' presence.

He's still locked in the room called *Without*, still under-joyed,  
still a non-commissioned disciple,  
still resentful and unforgiving, perhaps, of those responsible for the death of Jesus,  
still guilt-ridden and unforgiving, perhaps, of himself,  
for having abandoned Jesus at his hour of utmost need.

I wouldn't necessarily call him a doubter at this point.

His previous history with Jesus certainly would not support that moniker.

After all, Thomas was there with Jesus and the disciples  
when they received word of the death of Lazarus,  
as Jesus decided to return to Judea to be with Lazarus and his sisters.

When the other disciples balk at the danger of this suggestion and  
"doubt" the wisdom of returning to a place where people once tried to stone Jesus,  
Thomas is the one lone voice of complete and faithful devotion, saying,  
"Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16)

I hardly call that the response of a doubter, do you?

I call it a response of courage, boldness, or total loyalty,  
but hardly a response of doubt.

So, when Thomas does meet up with the disciples on the eighth day after the resurrection,  
and they confirm what Mary Magdalene and the other women have claimed all along,  
that they had seen the Lord,

Thomas simply voices thoughts that the other disciples didn't have the opportunity to voice –  
a need to see and touch the wounds of Jesus in order to  
confirm the validity of their claim, that they have seen the Lord, in the flesh.

I don't call that doubt; I call that empiricism:

relying on observation and the experience of all of one's senses,  
sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing, before making a claim.

I call that sensing. I call that good science. But I don't call that doubt.

So, when Thomas does meet up with the Risen Lord in that room called *Without*,  
Thomas hears, with his own ears, Jesus address them again  
with his customary greeting, "Peace be with you!"

And here again, Thomas does not have to ask, as Jesus once more  
willingly extends gashed hands and bares his lashed side for examination  
with the invitation to Thomas to use all of his senses necessary  
that he "be not faithless, but faithful,"  
"not unbelieving, but believing." (John 20:27)

I don't think this is an indication of Thomas' lack of faith,  
but rather a gracious invitation from Jesus **to** Thomas  
to come to faith, to come to belief, by his own empirical methods,  
if that is what it takes.

To which Thomas responds with an emotional exclamation more characteristic  
of his previous declaration of total devotion and loyalty: "My Lord, and my God!"

Does Jesus breathe on Thomas also, the recreating breath of the Holy Spirit?

We don't know.

Does Thomas leave that room called *Without*, as the other disciples left a week prior,  
overjoyed, commissioned as an apostle, empowered as an agent of forgiveness,  
as an entertainer of the possibility that without might not be what it first seems?

We don't know.

But his bold statement of faith surely seems to indicate uninhibited joy.

And the Christian tradition's testimony to Thomas' legacy as  
the one apostle who takes the Gospel outside the Roman Empire,  
all the way to India, where he is said to have been  
martyred for his faith, certainly seems to indicate  
the depth of both his commissioning as an apostle  
and his empowerment as an agent of forgiveness and witness  
to the new "witness" of Christ.

Henri Nouwen, the Catholic theologian, notes that in Jesus' farewell discourse  
of John 14, Jesus promises to send another Advocate in his absence,

the Holy Spirit (of truth), who will live with believers  
and be *with us* forever (John 14:16–18).

Nouwen says, “The great mystery of the divine revelation

is that God entered into intimacy with us

not only by Christ’s coming, but also by his leaving [us].

Indeed, it is in Christ’s absence that our intimacy with him is so profound

that we can say he dwells in us, call him our food and drink,

and experience him as the center of our being,” Nouwen notes.

(Henri Nouwen, *Show Me The Way*, p. 91)

This wonderful paradox of the Christian faith,

**that life *without Jesus* is mysteriously a gift of continued life *with Jesus*,**

is expressed in the lives of people

like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Alfred Delp, Nouwen says,

who while in Nazi prisons waiting for death, experienced Christ’s presence

in the midst of his absence,

so much so that Bonhoeffer was able to make his (own) bold faith statement,

**“Before God and with God, we live without God.”**

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, as quoted by Henri Nouwen,

*Show Me The Way*, p. 91)

Nouwen claims that as long as Jesus was present to believers

in the flesh, they did not yet recognize his full presence in the Spirit,

**but that Jesus’ mission is made complete with the imparting of the Holy Spirit,**

**which makes Jesus present even in his absence for those who believe.**

In other words, *without is with*, for those of us who believe

that Christ, the Lord has risen, indeed!

A very dear friend of mine lost someone very special in her life last week.

So, in genuine personal grief,

she participated in the Holy Saturday services at her Catholic church,

where the passion narrative was read and the sanctuary was still stripped,

much as it is here, from Maundy Thursday until Easter Sunday.

And she said that when she looked up and saw the tabernacle behind the altar  
stripped bare of the vessels which normally hold the body and blood of Christ,  
**stripped bare of the physical presence of the Jesus on earth,**  
she felt that she was looking straight into her own heart: empty, vacant, hollow,  
and void, now without the one she knew and loved so well.

But she also said that she knew, in her heart of hearts, that this was not the end of the story,  
that the God who loves the world, who blew the breath of life into creation  
and declared a preferential option for goodness and mercy,  
who created our inmost being and knit us together in our mother's womb,  
who knows the number of hairs on our head,  
and who ordains and knows the number of our days,  
who watches over our coming in and going out  
that God would not leave us in a such a state of destitution,  
or absence, or emptiness;  
would not abandon us to the grave (Psalm 16:10).

She said that the empty tabernacle, emptied of the pitcher, cup and ciborium,  
actually gave her a sense that Christ was near, that Christ was present,  
and that the story was not over yet, for her friend, for any of us  
who stake our lives on the claim that Jesus is *our Lord and our God*.

Many of us come to church like that, I think, during Eastertide especially,  
with empty tabernacle hearts, with lives stripped bare of the presence  
of those with whom we once sat side by side,  
held hands, laughed and winked at,  
of those with whom we once shared a Coke,  
exchanged good books, took pictures, teased,  
cried over failings, watched grow up and watched grow old,  
of those with whom we once brushed the hair from their eyes, shared dreams,  
listened to their prayers, straightened their tie, forgave,  
shared doubts and pain, and kept the faith alive.

We come to church, to this holy space, having dressed them for Easter

in the finest forsythia, daffodils, azaleas, lilies, lilacs, and hydrangeas,  
*but without them.*

We come to church, to this holy space, bringing them with us in our memories,  
bringing them to this place where we hear these same words every year:

“He is not here. He is risen. He is going ahead of you to Galilee.

There you will see him.” (Mark 16:6–7)

And we hear again the trembling testimony of the women from that Easter morning,  
and the overjoyed witness of the ten from that Easter evening,  
and the sputtering coming-to-faith of Thomas a week later,  
and we have hope that *without is not the end of the story, for any of us.*  
*Without is with,* for those of us who believe, that Christ, the Lord, is risen indeed!

Clyde Edgerton, in his book, *The Floatplane Notebooks*, has a young country girl, Bliss,  
attending the annual summer grave cleaning with her fiancé’s family.

Cousins, aunts, uncles, and others bring picnic fare and gather each May  
at the family graveyard,

which has stood amidst towering pine trees

since the 1800s, to straighten things up and make it neat as a whistle.

The men-folk mostly do the heavy work associated with the cleaning

while the women-folk take care of the food and fix the lemonade and brownies  
that will feed the crowd when they break for lunch.

Together they roll up their sleeves and cut, mow, trim and rake up a storm.

And throughout the day, as they work, they share their memories of those  
who are no longer *with them*, of those whom they are now *without*.

They talk about how they remember them when they were young:

how they wore their hair then, the color of their eyes then,

the way they lived their lives then, and the way they grew old and died.

The family brings them to life, in one way, through their memories and their stories.

But in that same family plot, once upon a time, another young woman named  
Cora Rosa Hunter Novella Hildred Martha Bird Taylor Copeland

planted the seedling of a wisteria vine,

when the first person was buried there in the 1800s.

And now, as the books say, "a horrific splendor of purple wisteria blooms off to the left of the graveyard... the vine covers an area about the size of four or five houses, running out around the limbs of tall and stately pine trees."

(Clyde Edgerton. *The Floatplane Notebook*, p. 40)

And in Edgerton's novel, that raging wisteria vine has a voice.

The vine sees and hears the dead in the graveyard rocking in their chairs and talking, and the vine speaks for them, once in a blue moon.

The vine gives voice to their stories, to their own points of view,

in their own words, without embellishment, of love and hardship,  
of friendship and work, of betrayal and surprise and death.

The vine hallows the truth of their stories, warts and all, in their own voices,  
as if they were in the same space, as if they were alive.

The vine brings them to life.

The living relatives are connected to the vine because they keep trying to kill it  
before it strangles out all the pine trees.

They keep trying to put an ax to its root, but to no avail.

It defies death and keeps being the vine.

And the non-living relatives are connected to the vine because it speaks for them.

It keeps them alive. It brings them into the present,  
and into the presence of those who gather to remember them.

And as I read Edgerton's book, I couldn't help but think of that wisteria vine as Jesus,  
the Risen Lord, who says of himself, "I am the true vine, you are the branches.

Remain in me, and I will remain in you." (John 15:1-9)

For the living and for the dead, Jesus is the true vine.

For those who are with us, and for those whom we are without, Jesus is the true vine.

For those who live in the present, and for those who lived in the past, Jesus is the true vine.

For those who are grafted into his self-giving love, who remain in his love,

who live their lives in his love, and die having lived their lives in his love,



Jesus is the true vine, uniting all believers and granting us eternal life  
through his undying love and living presence.  
He is our Lord and our God. Amen.