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“Practicing Resurrection Faith”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Second Sunday of Easter (Year C)

April 7, 2013

Isaiah 40:27–31; Acts 5:27–32; John 20:19–31

Lord, we believe! Help thou our unbelief. Open our hearts and minds to your Word, your Living Word that has the power to transform and change us and the power to guide us through the days of our lives. Enable us to live as those who prepare to die and to die as those who are ready to live through Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

“You must be relieved now that Easter is over.” It is a remark I’ve often heard as a pastor over the years. My answer is, “Yes, it is a bit of a relief to have Easter day and Holy Week over.” They are fairly strenuous periods in the life of the church, if you have not noticed, the staff takes a collective sigh of relief, and we find ways to renew ourselves. I must say that this last Holy Week in Easter as your pastor was an extremely gratifying experience for me as we experience God’s Spirit at work in our congregation in some remarkable ways for which I am grateful. I would not say they did not leave me a little depleted in terms of energy. After agreeing with the statement, “It must be a relief to have Easter over another year,” that is true if Easter is only a day in the early spring when the flowers are beginning to bloom, when it’s getting warmer, then the Easter is over. If it is a day when we pull out all the stops, celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord, if that is what Easter means, then Easter is over. That was last Sunday.

But today is the Second Sunday of Easter. It is affectionately called “Low Sunday” because as you can tell, there is more room in the sanctuary this morning. That is not to bring any judgment upon anyone who was here last week and not here this week. The “left over” lilies are starting to droop. The trumpet is gone. But the Easter reality is not over. I love Low Sunday. As much as I enjoy Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord, the question is hanging out there, isn’t it? What do we do with this Easter message? What does this Easter reality mean, not just for the high celebrations, but for the day-to-day living of our lives?

In Flannery O’Conner’s story “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” one of her characters is a notorious outlaw named Misfit. At one point he is terrorizing a family, threatening to kill them. The grandmother in desperation cries out, “Jesus! Jesus!” Misfit responds: “Jesus? Jesus was the only one raised from the dead... and he shouldn’t have done it. He has thrown everything off balance. If He did what he said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him. And if He didn’t then it’s nothing for you to do but to enjoy the few days you got left the best way you can.”

Misfit, in his distorted way, spoke the truth about the choices we face on Low Sunday. You and I have a decision to make: either the facts of life are set—you are born, you grow up, you live your life, and then you die—and there is nothing to do but grab what you can in the time left. If what he did makes a difference, if it is the defining moment in human history, if the Lord is risen indeed, then there is a whole other agenda set before us.

We have to decide if we want to stay on this road of following him to the end. If we want to follow not just to the cross and to the empty tomb where the women discover that Jesus was not there, but if we want to follow him into the implications of the new reality, that Christ is risen, risen indeed, we meet the disciples, locked in a room, for fear of those who did not understand what was going on. The room is filled with multiple feelings and questions. I guess the primary feelings of those disciples gathered in that room was bewilderment and uncertainty. You know what that feels like don’t you? So do I.

You and I are living in a time of uncertainty, a pastor leaving a congregation after 33 years. What does that mean for the congregation and for the pastor? They were locked in a room, living in fear and uncertainty. What does it mean for us that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead?

Suddenly, the Risen Christ appeared to them. Remember, this is one of his first appearances after his resurrection, and he doesn't ask them, "Where were you when I needed you? Why did you betray me? Why weren't you there to the bitter end?" What he says to them is simply, "Peace be with you. Shalom. May the fullness of God's presence be with you." No condemnation, no "I told you so." The message is that the Risen Christ gives us hope. The future is uncertain. We don't know what is coming tomorrow. It may be trouble and sorrow. But we know who is traveling with us, and we know what his greeting is to us: peace, wholeness, and fullness I extend to you.

But then there is the problem of Thomas, known to us better by the nickname, "Doubting Thomas." Some of you may have heard the story that Carlisle tells about several years ago, when she was on one of her trips to the then-Soviet Union. They were visiting in Latvia. It was the Low Sunday, the Sunday after Easter. They were in an Orthodox Christian Church. They had a guide who was their host. Of course, the service was in the native language, and they were just picking up little pieces of the service. And then they had the Scripture lesson, and their guide, the man who was supposed to make them feel comfortable and at home and welcomed, while the Scriptures were being read, he handed Carlisle a note. She opened it up, and it said in scratched-out English, "This is the story about unbelieving Tom." Thomas is not an unbeliever. But Thomas did have his doubts.

Thomas is a fascinating character. He is one of those people who is not an automatic follower. You don't just hand him the script, and then he does what comes next. He wants to know why. And then he's also very honest. He calls a spade a spade. He is willing to ask tough questions. When Jesus is telling his disciples farewell in his farewell discourse in John, Jesus said to them, "Let not your hearts be troubled; don't be afraid. I'm going to prepare a place for you. And you know the way." Thomas says, "Wait a minute, sir. How do we know the way?"

We don't know where you are going. We don't know the way." There is a Thomas in every group. I dare to assume there is even some of Thomas in you and me.

Garrison Keillor wrote in a column about his faith and doubt. "I came to church as a pagan this year, though wearing a Christian suit and white shirt, and sat in a rear pew with my sandy-haired gap-toothed daughter whom I would like to see grow up in the love of the Lord, and there I was, a skeptic in the henhouse, thinking weaselish thoughts."¹

Easter is a good time to face up to the question of whether we really believe in that story or do we just like to hang out with nice people and listen to organ music?

Keillor was in the good tradition of Thomas, sitting in church at Easter, confessing his doubts, and understanding that if you doubt, you are not alone. "So I will sit in the doubter's chair for a while and see what is to be learned back there," Keillor wrote. He is not alone sitting in the doubters' pew.

In the Old Testament lesson this morning, the prophet Isaiah was writing to people who had been in exile for 50 years, separated from God, living in a strange land trying to practice their religion among people who didn't understand it. They were often criticized and ridiculed for their religion. They ask, "Why do you say, O Jacob, 'My way is hid from the Lord?'" (Isaiah 40:27) They were feeling like God was not present with them.

There are moments in our lives when God does not seem present, when we sit in the doubter's chair, we are not sitting alone. Our ancestors in the faith have been there, and even our Lord was there. Remember Jesus' cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) If you're sitting on the doubter's bench, you are in good company. Doubt is not opposite of faith; it is an element of faith. We all see through a glass darkly. We move forward for the day where we will see face-to-face. That is the promise of God's presence among us and that we will not make this journey alone.

¹ Garrison Keillor, "A Pagan's Thoughts at Eastertide," *The Old Scout*, A Prairie Home Companion with Garrison Keillor, March 18, 2008. Retrieved from <http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/features/deskofgk/2008/03/18.shtml>

Jesus does not reject Thomas. He reaches out to him. He shows him his hands and his side. After this act of embracing Thomas, he looks over his shoulder and says:

- “Have you believed because you have seen me?”
- “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

My friends, that is us. We are those who have never seen Jesus in the flesh. All we have are the testimony of others, the testimonies of our own lives, stories that are bound up and kept together, kept alive, and we pass them on to our children.

These are the stories that become for us the mirror of our identity. We read about Doubting Thomas, and we see ourselves reflected. We read about the Prodigal Son, and we see ourselves. We read of the Elder Brother, and we recognize him in the mirror. We see the woman cast out, the lonely, the lost, and we see ourselves. We also see a God who would not let us go, who came and dwelt among us, who overcame even the power of death in our lives. This is why we come to church on Low Sunday, on any Sunday. This is why we come back again and again, and this is our charge, your charge as you go forward to keep the story alive in the heart of this city.

When we gather with the children to baptize a new infant, I ask them if they will be a friend to the new child being baptized, and if they will help the child find his way if he or she gets lost. And then I ask if they will share the stories of Jesus. That sounds pretty obvious and pretty easy, doesn't it? But there is a lot in that. The stories of one who dared to come and express the steadfast love of God was ridiculed, persecuted, and finally crucified for it. We tell those stories to each other, over and over again, in worship, in music, in prayer, in Bible study, and then we go out and we try to live those stories, we try to practice resurrection faith, we try to live the stories outside, and what we find and what I hope you and I will find as we go forward through these transitions in our lives is that these stories will be the living word of God, the presence of God's promise: “I will not leave you alone.” You can believe as you take the next step in your life that I am going with you. So can I. This is a living hope.

One of my friends in the ministry, Jim Lowry, calls it raw hope. He said, “Raw hope begins when you have the courage to question, the courage to deal with your honest doubts.” Thomas is not thrown out of the community, but he is welcomed. The church is a place that accepts and appreciates our doubts. The hope we have is based on the God who can take our doubts and our uncertainties, our fears and our bewilderment and transform them. We grieve, the apostle Paul says, but not as those who have no hope. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

In an Easter world, you can never tell where this hope, this love, this presence of the living God is going to show up and unlock our hopes and renew our faith. Practicing resurrection faith is about an ultimate reality at work in our world and our lives that appears anywhere, anytime, and most often, in those difficult times when we struggle with transitions, with loss, with lack of direction.

There is a story about a couple who were members of the church. They were faithful members, they went every Sunday, they were in a Sunday school class. They had every reason to let their lives slip away safely into a predictable groove. They are politically conservative, socially cautious by nature. They are retired, they have worked hard, they have been very successful. Their income is fixed. They are comfortable. Their children are successful adults. They have every reason to pat themselves on the back for a job well done, turn on the television, play golf and bridge, and relax. But they were invited to participate in a program in their church. It grew out of a Sunday school class. The Sunday school teacher said, “We’ve been reading these stories in the New Testament talking about us visiting prisoners. Would you like to get to know some prisoners?” They started writing a letter to a federal prisoner. It began slowly, a chatty letter every now and then, a card, a box of cookies on his birthday. They learned something about him. The main thing they learned is that in prison, he had a faith experience. He had been in a Bible study. He started reading the Scriptures. They talked about the Scripture. “When you did it to one of the least of these, when you visited those in prison, you visited me.” (Matthew 25:31–46) Then they got word the man was to be paroled, out, free, a human being to be faced and dealt with.

Last Christmas, when most retired folks carving turkeys and dealing with their families, this couple gave thanks and broke bread in their home, and they invited their newly-released friend in Christ to join them. Someone said to them, “You did what? Do you know what he was convicted of?” The woman smiled. “It might have been fraud. It might have even been armed robbery. I don’t know. Anyway, it was great having him in our home!”

Practicing resurrection faith can transform our doubts and transform our hopes and dreams and can transform our lives. The Risen Christ still says to you and me on this Low Sunday, “Peace be with you.” And you can never tell when this Risen Christ is going to show up. But most likely, he will come when we most need him.

So let’s keep telling the story. Let’s keep telling the world that the Lord is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!