

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
April 11, 2010 (Easter 2 - C)
John 20:19-31; "Witnesses"
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

The more I read and reflect on the people chosen as Jesus' disciples, the more I've come to appreciate them as people just like you and me – people who had jobs, who made their living in a variety of ways, with much the same thought processes that we have today as they were faced with choices in following Christ. They're all so very human – aren't they – each with their own personalities and foibles. During this Lenten season we've focused on a few of the earliest disciples and have considered what they all can teach us: Andrew and his evangelism, Lydia and her hospitality, Peter's hardheadedness, his denial of Jesus, Matthew who worked as a tax collector seen as a collaborator with Rome, James and John who looked for something deeper in their lives and found it following Jesus. And of course – Judas – the betrayer – but also perhaps the most profound example of the overwhelming grace and love we find as we follow Jesus. Last week we reflected on Mary Magdalene – one of the first witnesses to the Risen Christ – certainly startling in that culture to have a woman so significant in our Christian Story. Yet another example of the radical hospitality Jesus offers each of us as well and calls us to do no less as we gather as Jesus' body, called to continue his ministry.

Today we focus on Thomas – we've all heard of doubting Thomas and his insistence on I'll believe it when I see it. When we were digging out from that last snowstorm, it was a stretch to imagine that spring was coming – even when I knew I had crocuses and primroses in bloom under the snow piles in my front yard. Well, here we are – a lovely spring day – the flowering trees are gorgeous – the plants are out at Home Depot and all the area nurseries – we can finally believe spring is really here, even after a touch of summer last week – now we can settle in and savor this wonderful time of year, despite allergies, and despite the seemingly never ending yard work that awaits us.

I think maybe we've been too hard on Doubting Thomas over the years. I think we've considered his doubt a negative – what's wrong with him that he can't take the word of the other disciples and believe? Why does he have to see for himself? And we wonder about Jesus seeming to scold him, blessed are those who have not seen but who have come to believe. And I also think we take that scolding personally sometimes – we all have doubts for sure and I wonder if we feel guilty about that. What's wrong with my faith, what's wrong with me that I don't believe.

Although Thomas is included in the lists of disciples in the synoptic gospels, it is only in John's gospel that he speaks. And he speaks but three times, each of them striking:

It was Thomas who was the tower of strength who encouraged the disciples to accompany Jesus into Judea even if it means death. John 11:16 says, "Let us go also, that we may die with him." He was more profound than he knew in his speaking. Thomas is willing to share the danger. He says what others perhaps were thinking, of what others might have been afraid of, but he says it out loud.

Later on, Jesus is with his disciples – he foretells that one will betray him, that Peter will deny him three times. John’s account includes those rich, rich words – in my father’s house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you. And you know the way to the place I am going. Imagine the disciples hearing all of this – do you really think they understood it all? Did they really know what Jesus was talking about? I don’t think so. But it was Thomas who asked the question they all had inside – Thomas asks the question nobody else will. Where are you going? How can we know the way?

And Jesus responds with the supreme affirmation: I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Neither one of these two incidents sounds to me much like doubt. The first is an expression of Thomas’ loyalty, discipleship. It reminds me of Ruth’s statement to Naomi – where you go I will follow. It’s an expression of trust, of faith – yes, they did follow Jesus into Judea. And of course we know what happens there.

The second incident is a question – Thomas doesn’t understand what Jesus is saying – so he asks. He puts into words what the others are feeling and wondering. I know I’ve been in conversations where I’ve been lost – I may not know what a word means, but rather than ask, I stay quiet and end up missing the whole point. How much better it would be to ask – what do you mean? I wouldn’t call that doubt.

Then we have the story in today’s text – a familiar one to us. It’s Easter evening. The disciples are gathered behind a locked door. Imagine their pain, their confusion, their fear. They are afraid for their lives. Will they be killed next? They’ve seen the empty tomb, but as John tells us, they didn’t understand the scriptures. So they went from the empty tomb to their homes. But as many of us do, they wanted, yearned, to be together in their grief. So they went to that room.

We don’t know why Thomas wasn’t with them that night when Jesus suddenly appeared to them saying, Peace be with you, when Jesus showed them his hands and sides. All John tells us is that when they told Thomas of the experience, he didn’t believe them. Again, he expresses the shock and the surprise that the others feel.

But then the next week, Thomas is with the disciples when Jesus appears again. Same greeting – peace be with you. But Jesus tells Thomas to look at his wounds, to touch his wounds. Thomas’ response? The doubter immediately makes the most complete, most profound affirmation of Christ’s nature of anyone in the gospel: My Lord and My God!

So what does all this mean to us, two thousand years later. We who are not likely to physically see the Risen Christ as those disciples did in that locked room. We who are so likely to say, I’ll believe it when I see it. We who so often doubt. What is it we can learn from Thomas? We’re so like him.

Is having doubt such a bad thing? I’m not so sure – in and of itself, that is. It’s what we do with it that makes a difference. There’s a paralyzing doubt that stops us in our tracks. The doubt that says, I can’t. The doubt that keeps us from any action at all. The doubt that allows us to give up. A doubt that closes us down in mind and body – the kind of doubt I’ve seen in people who are in recovery who relapse after a period of time. Major or minor setback – it doesn’t matter. But the self doubt that sets in is debilitating – I can’t do this. And they stop trying.

That’s not the same doubt that Thomas expressed though, is it. His was a doubt that moved him to study, to learn, and then to action – to a deepening of his faith. It was

a doubt that says I wonder rather than I can't. Doubt, not stubbornness. Doubt, not closed mindedness. Doubt that led him to wonder – to ask the question.

And that's the other learning from Thomas I think – he asked. As a result of his asking, asking that same hard question that I'm sure the other disciples had in their hearts – we have the most profound, most deeply moving response from Jesus – I am the way, the truth, and the life. And because he asked, Thomas was able to utter his own statement of faith that can be ours today. My Lord and my God!

Thomas has the sense to ask. Silent doubts don't bring us answers. We have to share them. We need the community to help us grow in our understanding.

Our confirmation classes build a community that encourages questioning, that encourages verbalizing doubt - the confirmands may think they will be all set in their faith – know all they need to know after a year of classes. But they find out it's just not true – they won't know it all – their journey is a lifelong process. Maybe they're a little disappointed with this but we talk about how this is a time to question, a time to express their doubts. And over the year we name and share those doubts – we talk about them – and maybe sometime that's a hard thing for all of us – we ask questions – in community. And we help each other travel this remarkable discipleship path. Sometimes in those confirmation classes – we'll be in teaching mode and suddenly someone will burst out with a question. And I do mean burst out – our youth are much less subtle than many of us. That's one of things I enjoy most about working with young people – they can be much more direct about what's on their mind than we adults can. We can learn from them, can't we.

We too have to take the risk to ask the question to start the dialogue – to say, I don't understand. And we who listen in the community, we have to wait, to hear the question out, and then to take the risk to share our own knowledge, our very selves. Isn't that just what Jesus did?

Jesus has brought us a whole new creation – Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." John tells us of this Pentecost event, the breath of life, the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples. To us as well.

The word "breathed" here is the same word used in Genesis in the creation story – when the Lord breathed the breath of life into the lump of clay that was to become the first human. And in the same way that God gave life to that first human, Jesus Incarnate gives new life to those gathered hidden away in that room. Doubts and all – new life came to the people gathered and still does today.

This whole story is a bit strange, isn't it. From our modern perspective, it certainly is odd taken at face value. Put yourself in the disciple's place. Jesus is dead. The tomb is empty. The disciples are feeling empty. Like when someone we love dies, we get through the ritual, but then we go home and the realization crashes in on us that while life goes on, it will never be the same. We want the dust to settle but we know it never really will. Last week we celebrated the greatest festival of the church year – Christ is risen. But that holiday is over for another year. We can go back to the normal routine.

But no. Let's not let the dust settle. Let's not stop asking the question, expressing the doubts – like those first disciples, what does it take for us to recognize Jesus, the Risen Lord in our midst? We who have had the breath of life breathed into us. The Bible tells us that Jesus appeared to his followers in the most ordinary ways. In the

normal, routine ways. Jesus appears not in a blaze of light, not in the midst of a sermon, not in a daydream – but at supper time, in the garden, walking along a road. Jesus appears in the midst, in the midst of people, in the midst of real life, in the midst of questions and doubts that the real world asks.

Frederick Buechner writes:

“The sacred moments, the moments of miracle, are often the everyday moments, the moments, which if we do not look with more than our eyes or listen with more than our ears, reveal only the gardener, a stranger coming down the road behind us, a meal like any other meal. But if we look with our hearts, if we listen with all of our being and our imaginations, if we live our lives not from vacation to vacation, from escape to escape, but from the miracle of one instant to our precious lives to the miracle of the next – what we may see is Jesus himself. What we may hear is the first faint sound of a voice somewhere deep within us saying that there is a purpose in this life, in our lives, whether we understand it completely or not, and that this purpose follows behind us through all our doubting and being afraid, through all our indifference and boredom, to a moment when suddenly we know for sure that everything does make sense because everything is in the hands of God, one of whose names is forgiveness, another is love. This is what the stories about Jesus’ coming back to life mean, because Jesus was the love of God, alive among us, and not all the cruelty and blindness of men could kill him.

Jesus Christ is Risen! And he has passed to the disciples, to us, the job of spreading the gospel. Jesus has shown us the way. The Holy Spirit is breathed on us. We have the possibility for new life. We have the power to do God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. Through our doubts – through our fears – do we recognize it?

No, let us not stop doubting. But let us speak of the doubt of wonder, the doubt of openness, of searching, of action. The doubt that when shared can lead to a deeper faith and allow us to say with Thomas, without hesitation, but firmly, joyfully, awe-filled – My Lord and My God! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Let us rejoice and be glad.

Let us pray:

Our Lord and our God, we give you thanks that through your powerful love, Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. We praise you that by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus you have delivered us from the power of death, making us alive to serve you.

We ask you to work through our doubts, O God. Help us to grow, to learn, to reach out, to wonder. Deepen our faith that we might recognize those moments of your presence, the source of life, that we might share ourselves more fully. Help us, O God, to take our faith from this place, to make it a part of us in the whole of our lives – at home, at school, at work, not just when we are gathered as your community, your Body. Help us to see that Jesus Christ is indeed alive in each other, help us to sense your Spirit among us, and help us to share your Spirit that is within us with our brothers and sisters. Help us to share our doubts, our concerns, our fears, that through your Spirit among us, we can deepen our faith, share your love, do your work in the world. Keep us from settling into a routine, a rut, O God, that keeps us from celebrating the new life that comes from you. Free us from our self-centeredness, temper our sense of individualism that we may enter into your community. Allow us to recognize your presence through our brothers and sisters, and then let your presence that lives in us, be known to others. For we know, O God, that it is in the ordinary that you are with us. Open our eyes and ears that we might know your peace, that peace that can only be found through you. All

this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our brother, who lives and reigns now and forever. Amen.