

APRIL 19, 2020

WELCOME AND MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Welcome! So glad to have you tuning in as we continue our Easter journey with the risen Christ. Easter is a time of joy and laughter, celebration and festivities. Last week we celebrated Jesus' resurrection from the dead – the fact that God and life had the last laugh over death. The early Christians would carry on for weeks following the Easter lead to laugh and celebrate Christ's victory. So, in that spirit, here are a few jokes to lighten our mood, lift our spirits and help us laugh with Jesus at the joy of his resurrection:

- One mom was heard saying, "When do we usually find out who the kids will have for teachers next year? I hope it's not me again."
- A husband and wife were quarantined together. The husband said, "One nice thing about the quarantine is we haven't been out spending money." The wife replied, as she clicked 'add to cart', "So nice."
- If you run out of toilet paper don't worry, just use your 2020 planner!
- A parent was overheard asking, "Does anyone know the number that parents are supposed to call if we need a substitute teacher?"

Morning Prayer –

God, we are so grateful to be able to find refuge and safety in you. You are the ultimate health-care provider, for every aspect of our health, and we thank you for your love. Thank you, God, for friends and family, for connections and relationships that have been able to happen during this unusual time and in unusual ways. Thank you for the depth of gratitude that many of us feel for things that we used to take for granted – seeing the faces of friends and loved ones on the computer screen, hearing familiar hymns, reading or writing letters and messages, just generally slowing down the pace of our lives and simplifying our habits (at least somewhat or in some ways).

And yet, we also recognize the sense of loneliness and isolation, fear and frustration. Some are almost feeling overwhelmed by loneliness. Some of us are really tired. Tired of being at home, of trying to do school at home – whether learning or teaching, tired of things being inconvenient and disappointing. Some are afraid for jobs or opportunities lost, resulting in financial hardship or insecurity. Some of us are afraid for our physical health, with weakened conditions already – even before this virus. Continue to speak your peace into our souls, God. Come to us with your peace that passes all our understanding. Keep us safe and let us rest and work and learn and teach and live our lives in you.

We continue to pray for all who work in health care and for all whose work continues unabated – because it's essential to the fabric of our lives. Give them stamina, perseverance, energy and wisdom to take care of themselves

O God, help us to be open to your Easter surprises. To realize that "returning to normal" is not always what you might have in mind for your faithful followers. Help us to think and respond creatively to the new reality that Jesus' life and teachings, death and resurrection brought to the world. We pray in his name. Amen.

“MY LORD AND MY GOD” – PASTOR CALEB

READ JOHN 20:19-31

Another week of staying home. Another week of hearing dire news about the virus and the economy, especially in the area of New York. And yet, we are also in the season of Easter, proclaiming that Jesus is risen and has overcome all of the powers of sin, darkness, and death. How do we remain in a posture of hope and trust in times like these? Today, I want to encourage us to remember that the Spirit of the Risen Jesus meets us as we are in our questions and fears.

The Gospel of John devotes more space to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances than the other Gospels. In this account that immediately follows the scene of the empty tomb, the disciples are all in a locked room, full of fear after the events of the previous days. Jesus showed up in the space where they have been self-quarantining and greeted them with the simple Semitic greeting: “Peace be with you.”

What follows that first Easter evening is a commissioning: “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” We believe these words weren't just for the apostles but for all followers of Jesus through the centuries. We are sent to be the presence of Christ in our community and world. That's incredible and humbling to consider. This includes Christ's ministry of reconciliation as we learn to practice forgiveness of each other.

What makes this possible is the gift of the Holy Spirit which Jesus breathed into the disciples that first Easter. The Spirit is like breath and wind. It's unpredictable, and yet as essential to the Christian life as breathing air is for our physical life.

The disciples saw Jesus, receive the gift of the Spirit, and were excited. But for some odd reason Thomas wasn't there – no reason is given for his absence. Thomas can't just take their word for it. He's a realist, and he can't believe the tale all the others have told until he sees and touches it for himself. Thomas doesn't disbelieve that they saw someone. He wants to know that this was the same Jesus who died on the cross. That's keeping it real.

Like Thomas, I've always wanted to investigate and see things for myself. When I was a child, I once put a folded piece of paper in a drawer at night and prayed that God would put a mark on that paper by morning so that I'd know that God was real. Yet before I had gone to sleep, I already was feeling guilty. I remembered the verse about not putting “the Lord your God to the test.” So, I resolved not to look at the paper. In the morning I took it out of the drawer and threw it away, resisting the temptation to look and see if it had a mark.

Our last series was on the book of Job, who shares with Thomas the quality of persisting with questions until receiving a satisfying answer. This quality of seeking and asking questions is a gift that both makes a positive contribution and can border on a refusal to trust. Thomas is kind of stubborn after all. Couldn't he just take the other disciples' word for it?

But Jesus responded to Thomas' demand, and allowed him touch his wounds. In this way, Jesus gives yet another powerful sign to all of his disciples and gives Thomas the opportunity to exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" after encountering Jesus.

Thomas goes farther than any of the other disciples in proclaiming his faith. His stubbornness gave way to a beautiful confession of faith. Given that fact, it doesn't seem like Jesus got angry or was shaming Thomas. Jesus met him where he is at.

We often call Thomas "doubting Thomas," no doubt because Jesus tells Thomas not to doubt in verse 27. Though several English translations use the word "doubt," a literal translation of Jesus' words would be: "Don't be unbelieving but believing." Or alternatively, "Don't be faithless but faithful."

In the Bible "faith," "faithfulness," "trust," and "belief" are all one and the same concept. In a close relationship like a friendship or marriage there's a belief component – I believe my wife exists, obviously, and believe certain things about her that lead me to trust her. But it would be pretty ridiculous to say that being able to list off facts about your spouse is the same thing as a marriage.

Surely the belief that Jesus commends is more than believing certain facts, but rather relationship. And unlike our human relationships, trusting God feels like a leap in the dark, especially in a pandemic. We have to trust the biblical witness and the witness of people of faith who have journeyed before us. We don't get to touch the nail holes or Jesus' side, but Christ still meets us where we are in other ways.

We are all realizing that this pandemic has given us opportunities to slow down, to reconnect with our families, to reach out to one another, and to practice generosity. All of those things are an important piece of how we get through this. The other piece, I believe, is finding a kind of hope and trust in the Spirit of Christ that we discover to already be here with us.

In our passage, Jesus didn't blind Thomas with brilliant light or terrify him into belief. Jesus shows Thomas his *wounds* – the marks of the nails and the gash of his side. Isn't it interesting that with so great a miracle as the resurrection, Jesus still has these wounds? Have you ever wondered why the resurrection didn't erase them? I suppose because that suffering is an essential part of the story and of the forgiveness Christ offers. And it is connected to our suffering, including the ways the pandemic is testing us.

Because Jesus died and rose again, his presence means we don't have to be afraid of suffering. Letting go of that fear allows us to live in hope. We can hope for the future to be better, but this isn't simply about arriving at a better future, but knowing God's deep, abiding, and transforming love for us that is *already* with us.

Amen.