**Sermon: Second Sunday After Easter, Year A, April 19, 2020 UPMP**

**John 20:19-31**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

*SERMON: “LIVING INTO RESURRECTION”*

Let me repeat that ending: *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

So ends our reading in John…. *Through believing, you may have life in his name.*

Here we are, one week after Easter—one week after the “wild ride” of our church in the sharing of our story. We’ve had our hearts broken by the crucifixion, we rejoiced at the resurrection. …And we’ve settled in a bit. We’ve “caught up on their sleep”, so to speak.

Well, now what?

I think John gives us a good guidepost forward: *that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Friends, we are called, by way of resurrection, to have life in God’s name.

So that’s the question I ask: as a minister, but more importantly, as a Christian: what am I doing to assist in belief, and the living of life in God’s name?

Or to put another way, more personal, less vocational: how has my belief helped and empowered me to have life in God’s name?

Oh, I like that better: the personal.

Put it this way: Later in life, when someone might ask you: What was it like to live in the time of the Coronavirus? Well, our first thoughts go to facts and figures... arguments and ideologies… *we were told to wear masks but were told that cotton masks were not effective, we were told to stay home but told we could go out if we needed to…*

*…*or maybe more personal… I might say

*I doubted the capacity for the people in our country to sacrifice of themselves in order to care the about other. We’re self-centered people. “Individualism and Independence and Self-determination” are our values. So I was pleasantly surprised when people did so, and then not so surprised when the rumblings of “independence” and “self-determination” arised—yeah yeah yeah,*

but… do you see how I’m painting with a broad brush there? Trying to make universal statements that fit all of our culture or all of humanity into my little organized world?

But then try this: “What was it like in the time of the Coronavirus?” *Well, it made me appreciate how greatly I valued human, personal, interaction. The humble acts of kindness that come from sharing everyday things with friends. It made me focus on the parts of my faith that I, by my own self, cultivate and perpetuate, to keep me strong. It made me realize there are unhealthy people in my life and that really share nothing but negativity and I felt better when I could further distance myself from them, and in turn, become more constant with the life-giving friends and acquaintences. And as a culture, I always had hope that we would come out better for it. And it hurt for a while, but I think we did.*

See how different that sounds? See how your shoulders relaxed a bit when I turned from the big picture ideologies of our country and culture into the personal, thoughtful.

So here, I repeat what you surely have heard before:

I find myself creating this binary in my days: in my everyday life, in my daily choices and actions and decisions, I am either contributing to crucifixion or I am contributing to resurrection. I am either causing destruction, or I am repairing brokenness.

And I’m pretty sure that I’ve said this before as well: Just like Thomas, I would have doubted. Here in this culture I might go so far as to say that every single one of us would. We come from a culture where doubt is actually a safety mechanism.

--We know too many stories of swindlers and tricksters. Snake oil salesmen and ponzi schemes. Quick talkers, one-liners, tweeters and obfuscators--We’re bombarded by too many advertisements trying to get us to by this or do that. “Doubt” is why we haven’t lost our financial security, our independence, our individualism, our safety.

We’re trained to doubt in the same way we look both ways before crossing the road.

But financial security is not faith security. Doubt in our faith is an opportunity—just like Thomas—to literally become closer to Jesus. To do that, we have to risk sharing ourselves. Be open to share, and be open to change.

I’ve heard it said that doubt, or questioning faith, is “the devil trying to get a foothold”, but I prefer to see doubt and questions of faith more like a child tugging at the shirtsleeve. It is an opportunity to take time and attention. Friends, I welcome doubt.

I welcome doubt because whenever I’m at a juncture of uncertainty—not sure what to say or to do, not sure what path to take or decision to make—I ask: do these words and ideas, and what they ask in response from me, participate in the crucifixion, or participate in resurrection?

I mean, think of what Jesus said when he returned to that upper room (and I don’t know about you, but if I just saw my faith leader executed and he comes back from the dead to see me again, what he says at that moment is probably of some importance)

…“*Peace be with you”*

*…"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."*

*…"Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

*…“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

Jesus tells us we have a choice--and conscious or not we make a choice. In my daily actions am I participating in division and destruction, in the spread of anger like some plague or flu epidemic—am I participating in brokenness? Or am I repairing? Am I trying to make things right?

This reminds me of another practice I’ve learned as a parent: Anytime I say “No” to my children, rather than simply leaning on my authority, it is far more effective to redirect them to an alternative “Yes”…

(my teenage son uses this right back at me these days—when I give a “no” he asks: “what is the alternative?” It drives me crazy, but it’s fair).

What is the alternative? What is the “yes”

I think faith works that way too: we know that for each of us, the constructs of theology, the comprehension of the Biblical message, can in some instances be very different.

Amen. We come from different life experiences, and God will speak to each of us uniquely. I believe that. I was asked recently how we are different from Catholic or more extreme Evangelical Protestants—and I said that in the United Church of Christ we welcome different stories.

And I invite anybody, watching or reading or beyond, to come up to this position and place and share a message about how God is working in their lives. Put another way: want to share a message, send it. We’ll share it.

With two criteria—

One is that no human being is ever described or treated in our worship in such a way as to be “lesser” than another human being… or considered “lesser” in the eyes of God… because we believe that we are all beloved children of God. We do not create division in worship. Rather, we practice resurrection from brokenness and division.

Jesus said, as he appeared to his disciples: *…“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."* You can’t express hatred in the name of Love. Can’t attempt to isolate and dehumanize what Jesus has brought together.

And the other criteria: is that the message must focus on “yes”—because we can witness all around us the destructive forces of churches and cults and politics that constantly shout NO and back it up with a threat of fear until what is left is a vulnerable, afraid, and obedient child. *“Receive the Holy Spirit”* Jesus says. *“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

So: I can say that for sharing in the church, but can I do that in my own life? Anytime I say “no” to something in my world, can I turn it into a yes?

There is a lot of judgment in our culture, and consequently, there are a lot of things that repulse us in our day to day lives. We could spend our whole day saying “I hate this, I hate that, and I definitely hate that!” …Or we could say “I love this, I love that, and I definitely love that!”

Friends, this isn’t the most complicated theology—and yes, I say that often, but I repeat it because of how important it is!

I’m fairly certain that turning every “no” in your life into a “yes” will make your life more beautiful, and you, in turn, will make this world a better place. Hear those places where the “NO” paralyzes…—where you find yourself shouting “NO!”— And let Jesus guide you… Receive that Holy Spirit and let yourself be “sent” into living as a participant in the resurrection.

And while you are at it, forgive the sins in yourself—where you are constantly telling yourself “NO” in self-judgment and criticism. –Need a hand with that one? Come on in and talk, or let’s go for a walk!

I wish, every time I needed a little boost of faith, that I could have Jesus walk into the room and breathe on me. And I try in my prayer to let that happen, but sometimes the busy and stress and anxiety can seem like too much—too much static to fully let Jesus in…

That’s where the story comes in. Tell the story of resurrection. Tell the story of how God’s rhythm and order in our world does not let darkness and brokenness have the final word. That even if we can’t see it in one particular moment, light will return again.

Remember that poem by Gerhard Frost—which you’ve heard so often from the front of this church: If I have a dark room and light room, and I open the door between them, the light room floods the dark room, not the other way around.

And tell your story! Stories have a power and we need to hear each other’s. In the church we call this testimony. And your testimony matters!

If we could gather for Joys and concerns, here is what I would ask you: “Where have you been a witness to Resurrection?”

We yearn for practical examples of how to live out our faith, and in my experience, the best way to kindle a spiritual flame is not to be bludgeoned with ideology, but to hear how another person has kindled a spiritual flame—overcome adversity…

And… well, hear this line I recently read from one of my favorite writers: Brian Doyle.

*(Brian Doyle’s Martin Marten) The fact is that there are more stories in the space of a single second, in a single square foot of dirt and air and water, than we could tell each other in a hundred years. The word* amazing *isn’t much of a word for how amazing that is. The fact is that there are more stories in the world than there are fish in the sea or birds in the air or lies among politicians. You could be sad at how many stories go untold, but you could also be delighted at how many stories we catch and share in delight and wonder and astonishment and illumination and sometimes even epiphany. The fact is that the more stores we share about living beings, the more attentive we are to living beings, and perhaps the less willing we are to slaughter them and allow them to be slaughtered. That could be.*

Stories have the power to take us out of our theoretical and ideological minds, so that we can identify individual people, both to remind ourselves that we do not walk alone, and to remind ourselves that beyond the labels and descriptions we give to other people, they each have a unique soul and therefore each of them are beloved children of God—and it does us well to remember that. And to listen to their stories.

We are called to be the hands and heads and hearts of resurrection. Again, either participating in crucifixion or participating in resurrection…

And I think this is how it works: I don’t single-handedly repair the brokenness in the world. When I breathe it does not bring peace to the people in the room. I share what I can.

So enjoy yourself. Have some fun. Find time to celebrate each other’s lives, even at a distance, to tell each other your stories. Live into those “yes” moments more than you shun the “no’s”.

It is that peace, and the lives we live and the decisions we make when centered in that peace, that I believe is how God wants us to live into the Easter story, how God wants us to live into resurrection.

*Gaslighting. Get a good definition. Making someone question ones own belief.  Isn’t that everything that Christian’s are?*

*Kate Huey: Gathered in fear and confusion, they lock the doors, and wait. And suddenly, he is there, in their midst. What are his first words? "Peace be with you." No fear. No scolding. No turmoil. No doubt. Only peace. Those simple words Christians say to one another during our worship services (back when we used to gather for services in one place), perhaps without thinking too much about it: "Peace be with you.".*