

Sermon offered by Rev. Joy Kulvicki at Three Bridges Reformed Church  
on April 8, 2018

“Blessed are those who have not see and yet have come to believe”  
Scripture: John 20: 19-31

On that first day of the week, early Sunday dawn, which we now call Easter, Mary Magdalene was the first person to see Jesus. We have this tender picture of a woman weeping at the grave, asking where they had laid the body of her Lord. It took one gentle word, ‘Mary’, for her to realize that it was Jesus speaking and he was alive. Overcome with awe, surprise and joy she reached for Jesus to embrace him, to weep tears of gladness. Jesus gently said to her, “Do not hold onto me because I have not yet ascended to my Father”. He immediately sent her on a mission to go to the others -‘my brothers’ to tell them, “I have seen the Lord.” From deep sadness to deep rejoicing, the whole world had turned upside down. Mary must have flow with winged feet to share this overwhelming gladness with the followers of Jesus.

That Easter evening the disciples were gathered in lock-down afraid that they would be identified as Jesus’ followers and tortured. They had been to the grave at daybreak to see the grave clothes and the empty tomb. They had heard Mary’s incredible news that she had seen Jesus....but it remains a combination of fear, grief, hope and not knowing what to do. Amid this overwhelming confusion, Jesus stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” He showed them the wounds on his hands and his side. Jesus began immediately to empower the disciples, to prepare them for mission, to strengthen them and give them a path forward. “As the Father has sent me, so send I you.” He breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” From frightened followers Jesus created leaders who will go out to change the world. This is the beginning- up to now the disciples have been in training. Now they are sent out by Jesus to complete his mission. Their leader is no longer with them, but they are given the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to go forth. As they receive the power of the Holy Spirit, they are no longer afraid.

Thomas, one of the disciples who was called the Twin, had not been with them when Jesus appeared. He hears the good news with consternation...It’s unbelievable! Having a skeptical mind which questions, he takes his stand firmly, guarding against more disappointment and feeling ‘enough is enough’. “Unless I see the marks of the nails, touch his hands and put my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Through the years, Thomas' reputation as a doubter has been somewhat negative. It seems to me his skepticism is very attuned to the way we think today: Show me the facts! Prove it! The scientific world in which we live places strong emphasis on the empirical method, proving by facts. I can understand Thomas' reluctance to go along. He is saying, "I can't believe what I can't see."

It was a full week of being in opposition to his friends who would have been re-grouping and deciding how to go forward now that Jesus had sent them out to continue his work. I'm guessing that Thomas might have shied away from his companions but he was in the house with them when Jesus stood among them again. Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you"....then he says to Thomas " Put your finger here and see my hand. Put your hand on my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas was overcome with the reality of Jesus before him, responding to his doubts and having Thomas touch him. It may seem a rebuke, I think Jesus was generously giving Thomas what he needed, to bring him back, to restore his belief. For surely we know Thomas had been struggling in isolation in not being able to trust or believe like the others. Jesus was accepting Thomas where he was and bringing him to belief. What a powerful and empowering moment when Thomas falling to his knees, answers Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" And then Jesus gave a key message to the disciples and to all of us who believe. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

ALLELUIA! THAT'S US! YOU AND ME! We are the believers who trust the story, who believe Jesus was resurrected that Easter morning long ago and that he is alive today within the Trinity- teaching us, growing us, strengthening us, giving us hope and walking with us in the life of the Spirit!

We live in a scientific age, where proof is required to claim things are factual and reality bound. How I live with these world together is to believe that the factual, material world occupies a different space than the Spiritual world. The mystics do not see it that way: The mystics invite us to see that everything is sacred and connected. I have to work on seeing the holy in all things, that God is working and present in everything. Mystics do not separate the spiritual world from the material world. The Spiritual world is the unseen, the mystery, the unknown where we still experience awe and wonder for what our amazing God is continuing to do each day, creating and re-creating our world. A God who knows us by name, who loves us and touches our heart, who inspires us and gives us hope, who never gives up on us and continues to teach us and grow us and make us whole.

To believe in the resurrection of Jesus today is to believe that God continues to bring new life from the dead, that the God we have faith and trust in is a

transforming God, creating, re-creating, renewing and reconciling. One wonderful example of that is happening all around us. When I see the bright yellow forsythia burst forth, the trees bud, the whole earth greening, the birds returning to nest, I too am renewed. We have a house wren who has built a nest just outside our kitchen window. It is awe inspiring to watch the renewal of the earth once more....Oh yes! it is forecast to snow this week,,but Spring is coming!

If we are willing to give ourselves over to it, God wants to work renewal and transformation within each of us. The resurrection of Jesus is not a one time event long ago, but a constant pattern of growth and change where God uses the very things that are tragic, sorrowful, painful and unjust to grow us, transform and enlighten us. We are subject to the difficult things that happen in our lives, but then the miracle is that with trust, God is able to use these hard things as a growing medium, fertilizer (manure if you will), to grow us into new life, to transform us. This growing process is slow and requires immense trust that we can believe a new day is coming, that we can trust that God is present, that Jesus is walking with us on this long journey called life. That is the miracle of Easter alive in our lives, that is the Alleluia! that through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit we are encouraged, strengthened, given a lens through which to look at life which helps us see things differently. It gives us a perspective filled with hope, with love, with light where God's vision helps us to see the goodness, the divine design of our Creator.

My favorite verse from Hebrews is found in Chapter 11.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

I hold on to these words of hope when the darkness seems to be overcoming the light, when the world feels like it is broken, suffering and not redeemable-when reason would tell me there is very little to hope for. But the hope that comes from God is in my heart and I pray that it is in yours. This hope is stubborn, feisty and does not quit. Faith gives us a focus, a perspective, a way of looking at life and being in our lives. Faith provides a way through- a way through disappointment, a way through sorrow, a way through hardship, a way through anger, a way through fear.

It's a long road, with many potholes, detours and obstructions. We all experience them but God helps you to not get stuck there, but to be able in faith to move forward with the love and help of Jesus to guide, to lean on and yes, even enjoy the conversation of friendship.

Do not let skepticism and doubt be your focus, the lens through which you look at life. It is a dark world. Jesus invites you to see God's light shining upon you and our world. Look through the lens of faith and trust in Jesus. You will see God's world in transformation and in hope. Amen.