

Wesley United Methodist Church                      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
April 28, 2019 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Title: Believe in Him  
Scripture: Acts 5:27-32  
John 20:19-31

Over the last couple of weeks, I have watched three movies that are related, but different. Today's Scriptures feel to me like something similar. It is a movie or play in three acts – related, but different.

Act 1 takes place the evening of the day when Jesus rose from the dead. The disciples are in a house with the doors locked because they are afraid. Jesus has been killed and they do not yet know that he has risen from the dead. The authorities of their religion and their government conspired to kill Jesus and they are legitimately afraid that they could be next.

Suddenly, into this locked room, Jesus appears to them with the words, "Peace be with you." This is more than just a greeting – when Jesus comes, Jesus brings peace. In our lives when it seems like everything has fallen apart, Jesus still comes to us bringing a peace that is hard to understand – a peace that doesn't make sense, but a peace that somehow, God can make things work. We can discover that even though some things have come to an end, it is not THE end of everything. Ends are also new beginnings and the risen Christ brings us hope in the uncertainty of new beginnings.

But Jesus does more than just appear to the disciples. He also gives them a job to do. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Their lives will change. From here on, they are to live as sent people. "With the power of the Holy Spirit, they were sent into the world to reconcile the world to God and to forgive."<sup>i</sup>

We, too, are sent into the world to be witnesses to what we have come to know and understand. We, too, are sent into the world to share God's love.

Act 1 ends with the teaser that wants us to keep watching. Thomas was not with them when Jesus appeared. We don't know why he wasn't there. He might have been grieving. He might have withdrawn from them or he might have been the only one willing to go out in the streets to run an important errand. We don't know a lot about Thomas. His name appears in the other three gospels, but it is only in John's gospel, that Thomas comes alive, speaks, acts, and in so doing tells us a lot about himself.

Today's Gospel lesson shows up every year the week after Easter, which I love, because it always gives me a change to reconnect with Thomas. It is because of his response when the other disciples told him that they had seen Jesus, that we have the phrase "Doubting Thomas" as part of our English idioms. We use it to mean someone who refuses to believe something without proof.

But this is only one aspect of Thomas' character, an important one, but quite frankly one that I think is over played. The first time we actually see Thomas in action in John's gospel, is when Jesus has received word that his friend Lazarus has died, and Jesus announces that they are going to Bethany. It was a dangerous time for Jesus and the disciples were afraid for his safety if we went to Bethany. They were close to abandoning him. But it was Thomas who spoke up and said, "Let us go that we may also die with him." Thomas saw only danger and disaster ahead of them, but he was determined to be faithful to Jesus – even if it meant certain death. Thomas was a man of courage – willing to act, even if he was afraid.

Near the end of Jesus' life, Jesus had tried to prepare the disciples for his death and had tried to explain the cross to them. Thomas could not live with an unasked question and he had the courage to ask the questions. He was the one who asked, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? (John 14:1-6) It was to Thomas, that Jesus replied, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

In today's reading, at the end of Act 1, Thomas is the one who cannot believe without proof. Thomas insists that he will not believe unless he sees the mark of the nails in his hands and puts his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in Jesus' side.

For many years, I failed to notice that in the first part of this reading, this is exactly the proof that Jesus offered to the other disciples when he appeared to them. Did you notice that? If not, let me read those words again, "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."

It is interesting to me that Thomas is not asking for anything that hasn't already been offered to the other disciples. The curtain falls at the end of Act 1 with these words, "I will not believe."

A week later, the curtain rises on Act 2. The scene is once again in the house with the doors shut. This time, though, Thomas is with the other disciples when Jesus once again appears among them. Again, he greets them with the words, "Peace be with you."

He speaks directly to Thomas. He doesn't scold Thomas for not believing the other disciples, his trusted friends. Jesus doesn't hold it against Thomas. He doesn't scold Thomas. Instead, he meets Thomas right where he is and offers him what he said he needed so that he could

believe.

Jesus gives second-chances. Jesus meets us where we are. Jesus doesn't ever scold us for questioning or not believing. Jesus focused on what it would take for Thomas to believe – and then he did. Once he believed he made the strongest confession of faith found in the New Testament, "My Lord and My God."

Once convinced, Thomas became a man of great devotion and faith. We'll see Thomas one more time in John's gospel next week. Once convinced of the reality of Jesus' resurrection, after confessing Jesus as "My Lord and My God" Thomas took very seriously Jesus' words that sent him and the other disciples out to share the good news.

William Barclay wrote a book about the twelve disciples called "The Master's Men". In that book he says that the story of Thomas tells us two very important truths. The first is that Jesus doesn't blame anyone for wanting to be sure. Jesus never says, "You shouldn't have doubts." Instead Jesus says, "Don't profess a faith of which you are not absolutely sure, and you must fight your battle until you are certain." But please notice that Thomas didn't become convinced because of an intellectual argument but through firsthand experience of the power and the presence of Jesus Christ. Thomas didn't become sure of things about Jesus; he became sure of Jesus himself.

It doesn't surprise me that Thomas wanted to see the wounds in Jesus' hands and side as proof that it really was Jesus who appeared before them. However, it does surprise me, that the risen Christ had those wounds. I would have expected Jesus' resurrected body to be perfect, but instead those nail marks and the wounds became part of Jesus' resurrected body, the body that showed new life. They were not just part of

his past. Those wounds are the signs of Jesus' great love for us.

I think the nail marks say something to us about the places in our lives where we have been wounded. The recovery from our wounds is like a little resurrection. It is part of the same power that erupted in its purest form on Easter. Yet, like Jesus, we carry with us the scars from our wounds; they become part of who we are.

Henri Nouwen wrote a book called "The Wounded Healer" that talks about how the wounds in our lives can be used by God. This week, I received an email from a friend quoting some of Nouwen's words. Nouwen wrote, "Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. The main question is not 'How can we hide our wounds?' but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers. Jesus is God's wounded healer. Through His wounds we are healed. Jesus' suffering and death brought joy and life. His humiliation brought glory. His rejection brought a community of love. As followers of Jesus we can also allow our wounds to bring healing to others."

Our wounds can be and are used by God to bring healing to others. Our wounds can make us better listeners, better able to hear another's pain, better able to walk through the pain with someone else. Our wounds may help us better understand what someone else is going through.

In the last scene of Act 2, Jesus' response to Thomas' confession of faith is to affirm that those who have not seen and yet have come to believe are blessed. None of us has been able to see the human, historical Jesus. However, for many of us, our belief has been helped by seeing others who have lived out their faith in ways that have influenced us.

We, in turn, are invited and expected to live our lives as proof to others that Christ is alive.

Act 3, shows us one example of how Peter and the other apostles lived out their lives as proof that Christ was and is alive. Remember that in Act 1, they were in a locked room, afraid for their lives. In Act 2, they knew that Jesus was alive, but they were still in a room with the doors closed (and probably locked).

Act 3 finds Peter and the other apostles, a few months later, in the presence of the High Priest who is questioning and accusing them of actions they had been warned against. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”

Writing about this, The Abingdon Preaching Annual notes that, “Not too many months before, it was in the courtyard of the high priest that the chief priests and elders plotted to arrest and kill Jesus. It was the high priest’s slave who, as part of the mob that came to arrest Jesus, got his ear cut off and later healed by Jesus. It was the high priest who declared Jesus was insulting God. The high priest himself incited the people to condemn, mock, and spit on Jesus. And the high priest had already arrested and imprisoned Peter twice for preaching and healing in Jesus’ name.”<sup>ii</sup>

The man who only a few months previously had denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was, now speaks boldly. He and the other disciples who had locked themselves inside a house now are able to speak with courage – even to the one who had plotted to have Jesus killed.

“Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority.’” This scene from Act 3 is repeated over and over

again through the years.

Church traditions tells us that Thomas, who at first couldn't believe that Jesus was alive, went on to preach in ancient Babylon, where Iraq is today, in Persia – present day Iran, and went as far as the east coast of India. When the Portuguese landed in India in the early 1600s they found a group of Christians there – the Mar Thoma Church established through Thomas' preaching over 1500 years earlier. We believe that Thomas was killed around 72 AD in India. Thomas, who we call the Doubter, came to believe so fervently that he spent the rest of his life preaching the Christian message of love and forgiveness to what were then the ends of the earth.

Act 3 continues today, whenever and wherever we share our faith in whatever way we are called to do so. Act 3 continues when our children learn about our faith in Sunday School. Act 3 continues whenever people speak out and stand up for justice and freedom. Act 3 continues each and every day as we live our lives in ways that provide proof that Christ is alive.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, here are your disciples – your wounded hands and feet in the world today are ours. At times we have been the frightened ones, staying at a distance, worried about our safety or our reputations. But you come close to us, bringing peace and challenge, unlocking our potential and setting us free. At times, we have been the doubting ones, when creeds conflict or certainty has evaded us. But you come close and allow us to speak our minds, accepting us and setting us free. At times we have been the confused ones, feeling far from you with questions that don't have answers. We listen for your voice and hear you say, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Through our fear, through our doubt, through our confusion, we pray that we may continue your work, as we travel many roads, liberated and united by the love of the resurrected one. Amen.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Lockhart-Gilroy, Annie. In [www.gbod.org/worship](http://www.gbod.org/worship) Easter season material. Easter 2019: Part 1 Living. Material for Easter 2.

<sup>ii</sup> Hoezee, Scott Editor. The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2019, p.50.

<sup>iii</sup> “Here are your disciples” from Stages on the Way pp. 196-197