

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Second Sunday of Easter- March 30, 2008

Scripture lessons: I Peter 1:3-9 & John 20:19-31

UNLESS I SEE THE MARK

Hallelujah, we're in the Easter season. At this time of year we especially celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. We acknowledge, too, that there have always been serious doubts about it. We remember, for example, that the early church starts rolling after the first Pentecost and Paul preaches Jesus' resurrection at the Areopagus in Athens. His Greek listeners *scoff* at him (Acts 17:32).

Even more striking is the doubt among Jesus' own followers in the Easter stories the gospels present. Last week we listened to St. Luke's account of the first Easter. He wrote of the women going to Jesus' tomb, finding it empty, and being told by angels that Jesus is risen. The women report this to the disciples, but Luke says that the women's words "seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (24:11).

In Mark's Easter story, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome are first to go to the tomb. An angel tells them that Jesus has risen and sends them to tell the rest. But Mark says, "(The women) went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8).

Later Mary Magdalene reports that she has seen the Lord, but Mark, like Luke, says that the disciples "would not believe it" (verse 10). Shortly afterwards, Jesus appears directly to two of those disciples. They go back to tell the others that *they* have seen Jesus, but Mark again says, "(T)hey did not believe them" (verses 12-13).

Today's reading from St. John then gives the best-known story of Easter doubt. In John, chapter 20, Jesus appears to his disciples as they're huddled together, afraid for their lives. He bids them peace, commissions them to carry on his work, and gives them the Holy Spirit. One of the disciples, Thomas, isn't there when this happens and later tells the others, "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" (verse 25).

All of these stories remind us of how outrageous it was from the start to claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. First century people may not have been scientists, but they knew that dead people usually don't rise. Belief in Jesus' resurrection always has had and always will have to contend against the powerful and legitimate resistance we have to reports of things like this ever happening. In our experience, they just don't.

Yet the story of Thomas's doubt reminds us of something more that was going on with those first disciples, something more than a natural skepticism that made it hard for them to believe that Jesus lives again. The disciples had been *traumatized* by the crucifixion. They had longed for Jesus to be the Messiah, the one who would deliver Israel from Rome's cruel oppression. But instead the Romans had crushed him. The disciples were left reeling by this and, fearful for their lives, all they knew to do was to hide.

What goes on deeper down with people who've been clubbed by trauma? Inwardly, they begin to fracture and go numb. They start to go blank and shut down. Retreating into a state of "not really being there" becomes their way to cope.

The great theologian, Karl Barth, points to elements in John's story which suggest this way of understanding Thomas and his fellow disciples. When the risen Jesus first appears the story says that Thomas is "not with them". As such, Thomas can stand for anyone who, stunned by trauma, is "not really there" when Jesus comes. He can stand for all of us who might be present in body, but are long gone in mind and heart when the risen Christ comes to reveal himself.

Barth also emphasizes that in John's story even when Thomas finally is there the doors of the room remain "shut". Balled up and closed off inside by the trauma they've undergone, Thomas and his fellow disciples refuse any cheap consolation that might come from a bogus story about Jesus alive again. They want nothing to do with any illusions about the man they knew had been so brutally killed.

That's why the rest hadn't believed until they first had seen for themselves. That's why Thomas insists, "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." They all hurt too much to be comforted by fantasy.

Jesus understands all of this and responds accordingly. First, he walks through their shut doors. Thomas, the rest of the disciples, and we don't have to open them or even be able to open them because Jesus can still come through.

Secondly, Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds even before Thomas has the chance to ask. Jesus is adamant that the comfort he brings will take full account of the wounds that he and we suffer on the way to the new life he gives. To pretend that the hurts this broken world inflicts are not real, deep, and painful is to turn away from the authentic healing and comfort the risen Christ offers. We can see the risen Jesus only insofar as we also see the tortured and crucified Christ.

A man named John Conrad gives remarkable witness to this in the eulogy he delivered at his son's funeral. Shortly after he was born, John Conrad, Jr. showed signs of having tuberous sclerosis, a genetic disease that can harden the cells in virtually every tissue of the body. Over time, John, Jr. developed TS tumors throughout his brain, skin, and heart. His case turned out to be a worst case.

His parents did their best to care for him at home, but realized as the disease brought on increasingly bizarre, violent, and self-destructive behavior that their son's care had gone beyond their ability to give. When he was eight years old, they committed him to a life of institutional care, first at a state psychiatric hospital, then at a residential school, and finally at a private hospital. John, Jr. lived in those places for five more years.

With the exception of the last year, he lived the final five Christmas Eves of his life in a padded cell, often in a straitjacket. When his father visited him during the first of those Christmas times, John was the only child in the entire children's hospital. He was locked up, straitjacketed, asleep, and exhausted from hours of trying to hurt himself. When his father took him in his arms and woke him, John looked up with his hands tied behind his back and said, "Daddy I want to be good. I just want to be good."

He did have his good days. During his last year he lived at the residential school where he didn't need to be locked down. Occasionally, he could go out into public- to malls, to movies, to baseball games and batting cages. He loved the freedom of that.

He also loved to join his family for dinner every Sunday night. When his father brought him home for those times he loved to burst through the door and call out his mother's, sister's and brother's names. He loved eating with them and having his father give him a shave afterwards. During that year, for the first time in five years, the Conrads saw John smile, laugh, and sing again.

But for his last days, he was bound to a hospital bed. His head was shaved, an IV was in each arm, and his hands were tied down with restraints. On his very last day, he told his doctors he was having a "thumbs-up" day which was great news because otherwise John could be very violent and abusive to the hospital staff. But on his good and last day he asked his mother, "Mom, do you know what I like?" She said, "No, John- what do you like?" and he answered, "Mom, I like you!"

In his eulogy, John Conrad, Sr. asked, "How do you celebrate a life like our son's?" The answer he gave testifies to the presence of the crucified yet risen Christ in his family's life. Mr. Conrad said:

“John taught us many lessons. They have certainly been expensive lessons, and we would never have voluntarily paid this dear price, but the value of (them) and (of) John’s life to us is very profound.

(From him) we learned to live life after death- after the death of our expectations. We learned to love our child, the child that we sometimes had thought would be better off dead. We learned to love (him) though he was perceived to be of no value . . . We learned to (love and) accept him on his terms . . .

(D)espite the Christmases that (he) spent in padded cells . . . we learned to respect his right to live and gave him all the love and support (we could) . . . We learned there is life after the death of a ‘normal’ life (and) that once a tragedy occurs, it redefines your life and that your life before that tragedy is no longer possible. We learned that we had to build a new life with different expectations . . . a life based on love, faith, and hope . . .

(W)e’ve learned to live life with a broken heart and to enjoy life anyway . . . (We have been) inspired by John’s ability to bounce back from his hopeless life with (an) undying spirit of hopefulness . . . We have been inspired by (his) love . . .”

Thomas said to his fellow disciples, “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.” In this, Thomas speaks for everyone- for the Conrads and for all whose wounds are too deep to be soothed by fake comforts. He speaks for all who, traumatized by this world’s brokenness in sin, know that only a God who comes to us crucified and yet risen can offer the balm that truly heals.

In Easter, we celebrate the new life that *Jesus Christ* brings. It’s the life that only the God who was scourged, nailed, and speared can give. It carries with it the power to enter straight into death’s maw, to bear its worst, and to rise triumphant even over the grave. It comes from the God who knows us right down to the nail and spear prints in our hands and sides, who suffers our deepest afflictions with us, yet who raises us both now in the midst of them and forever in the life to come where those sufferings will be no more.

We belong to this God and no other. With the crucified yet risen Christ we can bear life’s harshest wounds in the assurance that they will not ultimately defeat us. We know this at this table where our hunger is met by Christ’s body broken for us and our thirst quenched by Christ’s blood shed for us. We know it through the life eternal of the One who has died, who is risen, and who will come again.

He comes to us through locked doors. He offers us his wounded hands and side. He shows us that with him, crucified yet risen, we never have to be afraid again. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER- March 30, 2008

Lord Jesus Christ, in this Easter time, we’re amazed again to hear that You are risen from the dead. Like Your first disciples, we have our doubts about it. Even more, like them, we have our fears. We’re afraid because we, too, have been hurt, wounded, and traumatized by this world broken in sin. Afraid, we lock ourselves up and hide ourselves away. We become too doubtful and nervous to embrace the new life that You bring.

But today, we are bold to pray to You again as our living and loving Lord. We pray You to come to us again through our locked doors, to show us the wounds in Your risen body, and to set us free from every fear that holds us back. Fill us with the peace and power of Your Holy Spirit. Inspire us with the truth that You have conquered every form of death and have set Your Spirit loose to complete Your new creation. Help us with resurrection power to be mighty witnesses to that fact. Help us live freely and courageously as Your risen people, serving Your Kingdom come on earth and it is in heaven. We pray for this again in the way that You have taught us, saying together, “Our Father, . . .” Amen.