

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

April 24, 2022

Second Sunday of Easter

PRELUDE “When Morning Gilds the Skies”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

Unlock your hearts – God wants to come in.

**Open your lives – God needs a home.**

Swing wide all the doors – God’s children need shelter.

**Easter rolls the stone – and nothing can be shut anymore.** (Maren C. Tirabassi, *Before the Amen*)

HYMN No. 225 “Worship Christ the Risen King”

Rise, O Church, and lift your voices, Christ has conquered death and hell.

Sing as all the earth rejoices; Resurrection anthems swell.

Come and worship, come and worship, Worship Christ, the Risen King!

Doubt may lift its head to murmur, Scoffers mock and sinners jeer;

But the truth proclaims a wonder Thoughtful hearts receive with cheer.

Christ is risen, Christ is risen, Now receive the Risen King!

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

When we keep our faults and failures locked safely away, we have no need to confess. But God comes into our hearts when we least expect, so we can be filled with forgiveness, with hope, with peace.

Please join me as we pray together, saying,

PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS (in unison)

**God of empty tombs and emptier people: when we hesitate to speak of your hope, forgive us, and give us a voice. When we find it difficult to love one another, forgive us, and give us fresh compassion. When we want to stand with the high and mighty, forgive us, and seat us next to the poor and oppressed. When we stay locked behind our fears and doubts, forgive us, and send us out to share your grace. When we cannot believe your Word of new life, forgive us, and fill us with your joy.** (Silence)

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Christ comes into every shadowed corner of our lives with the light of Easter. Christ comes into the locked rooms of our faults and gifts us with grace and hope.

**Christ comes to fill us with peace, so we may proclaim the good news of mercy and forgiveness for all. Thanks be to God. Amen.** (Thom M. Shuman, *Lectionary Liturgies*)

SCRIPTURE READING 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

What does it mean to believe? What does it look like? How would others know we believe – or what we believe? What is necessary to establish – and sustain belief? In John Irving’s book *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator John has a number of conversations with his friend Owen Meany about the meaning of belief. In one scene at the schoolyard, Owen illustrates his belief in God by pointing to a gray granite statue of Mary Magdalene as dusk slides toward darkness. When it has become so dark that the statue is no longer visible, Owen asks John if he knows that the statue is still there. John says that of course he knows, but Owen keeps pushing.

“You have no doubt she’s there?” (Owen) nagged at me.

“Of course I have no doubt!” I said.

“But you can’t see her – you could be wrong,” he said.

“No, I’m not wrong – she’s there. I know she’s there!” I yelled at him.

“You absolutely know she’s there – even though you can’t see her?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I screamed.

“Well, now you know how I feel about God,” said Owen Meany. “I can’t see (God) – but I absolutely know (God) is there!” (page 451)

To be honest, I remember reading and loving *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, but I don’t remember what’s at stake in this conversation, or why Owen and his friend John are so heated up by the question of believing in God. What I do know is that this conversation is a shining example of exactly what the writer of John’s gospel is looking for in today’s reading from John 20, when Thomas protests that he’s not ready to believe in Jesus’ resurrection. There’s some evidence and experience missing that needs to be provided before he’s willing to go out on that limb. He needs to see and feel for himself, and then, well, we’ll see what happens then.

Last week, we met Mary Magdalene, Peter and the Beloved Disciple at the tomb. I took a shot at the Beloved Disciple, because the story said he looked into the tomb, believed and then went on home. I have no idea what he went home to do – secure himself behind a locked door? nurse his wounds? make a pot of coffee? take a nap? prepare his sermon for the next gathering of Jesus’ followers? post a Twitter announcement of the great good news? I hope my shot wasn’t a cheap one, but it’s not obvious to me that he’d had a transformative moment of coming to belief, whatever it was he thought he believed in. We don’t know what Peter thought; he just came and then went. Mary, on the other hand, stayed; she wept, she heard her name spoken by the voice she had given up all hope of ever hearing again, and then she accepted Jesus’ commission that she go and tell the others what she’d seen and heard.

John tells us that Mary did as Jesus asked: she went and found the disciples and exploded with ecstasy in front of them: I have seen the Lord! And then she told them about their meeting and the things he had said. We aren’t given any details about how the disciples received that news – except that John tells

us when Jesus came to them directly, later that night, their doors were still locked, because they were still sheltering in place for fear of more violence.

Jesus did come to them, suddenly appearing out of nowhere, completely unphased by the chain on the door. He spoke a word of peace to them, showed them the wounds of his death, and again said, Peace be with you. He breathed on them, equipping them with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then articulated the authority that now rests on their shoulders: forgiveness is up to you – the sins you forgive are forgiven, the ones you retain are retained.

I have no idea where Thomas was when all of that was happening. Maybe he'd gone to pick up sandwiches and drinks or to get some fresh air, or back to the tomb to see for himself what the others had been talking about. It seems noteworthy that he had left behind whatever security the locks offered. When he returned, the others flooded him with their reports of Jesus' appearance. When they said, we have seen the Lord, he was less than enthralled, saying your report doesn't do it for me. I need to see and hear and feel for myself. Until then, I will not believe. After then? Well, we'll see where we are then.

A week later, Jesus was back – not with challenge or criticism, but to give Thomas exactly what he'd asked for. He came and stood among them and said, peace be with you. He turned directly to Thomas, showed him his wounds and offered, whatever it takes for you to believe. I'm here, now, for you. In the presence of everything that was offered, Thomas confessed: My Lord and my God. To which Jesus responded, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those have not seen me, yet who will come to believe.

Which brings me back to where I began, asking what it means to believe. What does it look like? How will others know we believe – or what we believe? What is necessary to establish – and sustain belief? I was really surprised to read words written by Rene Schreiner, a member of the faculty at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. She wrote that the Greek root behind the word “believe” is *pist*; and the nuances of that Greek verb range from believing something is true, to relying on something (or someone), to trusting in something (or someone). While the English verb “believe” largely has a cognitive emphasis—our “brain” either agrees or it doesn't, trust is more relational and often includes the feelings behind our thoughts and actions. We often think of believing as something we do with our “heads” and trusting with our “hearts”, but the Greek root *pist* ties them together.

I'm still working on weaving belief and trust into one fabric, but it intrigues me. Schreiner says that if we want insight on how the concept of trust helps illuminate the gospel, we should ask those who are profiting (and benefiting) from “designing for trust”, even in the midst of our current culture of distrust and suspicion. She asks, “Have you stayed in an Airbnb lately, or taken an Uber or Lyft? Or maybe you've taken the even greater risk of opening your car or home as a host or a driver? These services are evidence of the power of trust to build relationships even amid very real risk, and our passage today highlights how Jesus' ministry “designed for trust”. It's all about opening doors: car doors, house doors, the locked doors protecting the disciples... In his 2016 TED talk, Airbnb founder, Joe Gebbia describes how “designing for trust” is the critical factor in getting people to open doors, whether to enter or to let people in. In the case of the disciples, it is a matter of getting them **out** the door, despite the risks, to fulfill their commission from Jesus...” (*Working Preacher*, for April 24, 2022)

As I was processing Schreiner's words as well as the Airbnb TED Talk, learning to hold belief and trust together, I turned to another writer, Nancy Claire Pittman, who teaches in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and saw her point out the ways in which Thomas broke trust with his fellow disciples when he rebuffed the good news of what they had seen and heard while with Jesus. Throughout the Gospel of John, love and trust within the faithful community are the significant expression of the work of Christ in their midst, and yet Thomas brushes that aside by basically saying, there's no way I will believe unless I see it for

myself. Their eyes and their fingers are not good enough for Thomas; he must do it for himself before he will believe. (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2, page 399*)

Today's text talks a lot about coming to believe in the presence and the grace of the resurrected Jesus, and suddenly because these two writers have opened my eyes to it, I also see and understand the question of trust in a whole new way. The disciples may be willing to proclaim, My Lord and my God, but until they unlock those doors and step outside, little witnessing is going to take place. If they stay inside until the waiting world is friendly, they – we – may never respond to Jesus' call and commissioning. But Jesus equips us with the Holy Spirit and sends us out to continue his work of healing and feeding, teaching and welcoming, forgiving and embracing. If we believe in him, and in his resurrected presence among us, we can also trust him to walk with us, lead us, guide us and always stay by our side. And we don't have to do this alone. As members of a community of Christ, we share our experiences, our beliefs, our trust – and yes, when we have them, our doubts. We open the door to welcome others in and to let ourselves out to serve in God's world, grateful that the peace of God surrounds us, empowers us and always enfolds us.

“In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, Owen believes in God and God's work in his life, without clear-cut evidence or proof. His lifelong friend John does not have the same solid conviction. What John has is a confidence in his friend that carries him through his own skepticism into a new life.” (*Feasting on the Word, page 401*) What more could any of us ask? Amen.

HYMN “*In the Bulb There Is a Flower*”

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;  
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!  
In the cold and snow of winter that's a spring that waits to be,  
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;  
there's a dawn for every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.  
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,  
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Holy God, as the earth continues to awaken around us, we give you thanks for the countless signs of life and promise that appear everywhere: for daffodils and tulips, rhubarb and asparagus, tree buds and greening grass; for birds that fluff nests and warm eggs and peepers that fill the night with song; for rivers that swell, lakes that rise, and the reminder that even spring snow serves as reinforcement to the snow pack. Mighty and majestic, delicate and fragile, all of it bears your fingerprints and comes as a reminder of the abundance of your creation and the overflowing generosity of your heart.

Gracious God, we don't have to look long around us to realize that all is not well with your creation. From blazing fires in Arizona to empty reservoirs in California, the garbage carried in with ocean's tide and shrinking ice fields in the Arctic, tornadoes that sweep through more often and blow more ferociously, and crops that shrivel or rot in the fields. Teach us what you meant when you appointed us to be your stewards and asked us to tend and care for, protect and preserve the wonders of your

creation. Show us how to live in harmony with all that you have made, so that we can hand on to our children's children a healing and whole planet.

We pray, loving God, for all those who are sick and grieving, weary and without hope. For those doing the hard work of recovery, those who struggle to put food on the table and keep a roof over their family's head, those whose lives have been marked by violence and those who wear the scars of abuse. For the people of Ukraine, those fighting, those fleeing, those hungry and without medicine, those hunkered down in basements and subway cars. For the leaders of our country and of every country, that they lead with courage, decide with wisdom, listen with humility, walk in love and follow the paths that make for peace. Show us, O God, what it means to be your resurrection people, growing in trust, serving in love and witnessing to you with actions as well as words.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken; and hear us as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (depts)

OFFERING

In recent weeks, I've talked a lot about the One Great Hour of Sharing and the work it does with both disaster relief and development. I'm pleased to report that together, members of this congregation have given \$285 as of last Sunday. I can also report to you that we are aware of \$600 going from this church to assist with the United Church of Christ's efforts to respond to the crisis in Ukraine. I received an email a couple of weeks ago that said that that special offering has exceeded a million dollars in gifts, probably the largest ever special offering for relief and support. The work of both funds is ongoing and the needs are extreme. Please hear our gratitude for your generosity, and know that additional gifts are always welcome. If you choose to do that, make checks out to our church and mark the memo line with a designation for how you want the money to be used. Thank you for all you do and for all you share.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

**God of new life, you teach us that our faith is forgiving and for giving. Inspire us to expand our faith through reconciling deeds and to expend it through generous offerings. Accept our gifts, we pray, as signs of our desire to serve well in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

(Glen E. Rainsley, *Hear Our Prayer*)

HYMN No. 227 "Thine Is the Glory"

Thine is the glory, Risen, conquering Son;  
Endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won.  
Angels in bright raiment Rolled the stone away,  
Kept the folded graveclothes Where Thy body lay.  
Thine is the glory, Risen, conquering Son;  
Endless in the victory Thou o'er death hast won.

Lo! Jesus meets us, Risen, from the tomb;  
Lovingly He greets us, Scatters fear and gloom;  
Let His Church with gladness Hymns of triumph sing,  
For our Lord now liveth; Death hath lost its sting.  
Thine is the glory, Risen, conquering Son;  
Endless in the victory Thou o'er death hast won.

BENEDICTION

May the God who shakes heaven and earth,  
whom death could not contain,  
who lives to disturb and heal us,

bleſs you with power to go forth  
and proclaim the goſpel. Amen.

*(New Century Hymnal)*