

Call to Worship

Easter is not an event that we use for our own interests. In Easter and its aftermath the one who is raised from the dead continues to use us for his purposes. **The risen Christ keeps coming back to his people, keeps sending them forth, keeps giving them what they need to be faithful.**

Prayer of Invocation

Risen Savior, Prince of Peace, we reach out to you today. Let your peace dwell among us.

May we, in the sharing of that peace, experience new life in our congregation. May we too vanquish the doubts of the world with the offering of peace. Speak to us, speak through us today. These things we pray with hallelujah and hosanna! Amen!

The Word John 20:19-31 Common English Bible

Jesus appears to the disciples: It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." **After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."**

Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven." Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. **The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe."**

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. **He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"**

Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. **But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.**

Living the Word

When I turn on my computer and the internet goes to my Bing front page and it shows me a very large monster fish caught off the shores of somewhere, or my good friend tells me that her husband is working on a camera that will photograph into black holes in space when it gets out there and expands to 33 feet, those are the times I whisper "Unbelievable!"

When God comes to earth as a tiny baby and spends years growing into the Son of God, to do only three years of ministry so we can know our Creator God's plan...that is unbelievable. But when Jesus rides into enemy territory, dies before the eyes of all who have come to love him and then comes back into their presence after death. That is extremely unbelievable.

It is not so important for us to keep track of the monster fish of the world, especially around the lakes of Wisconsin; and we can be amazed about the aerospace accomplishments, yet most of the understanding of that particular camera is way beyond most of us. But the knowledge of Christ coming to teach us how to live, how to die and how to live again, is important to our whole being.

The disciples have returned and gathered in the Upper Room, where they shared the Passover meal less than a week before. That morning some of them had found the empty tomb, after Mary Magdalene announced to them that Jesus' body was missing. They had then gone home, but now they have gathered together again to share their grief and pain over the death of their Lord and the missing body.

If the Jewish leaders would do this to Jesus, were they the next to be killed? And who had emptied the tomb? They were terrified, but they came together in community in the midst of their fear and grief. So they gathered behind closed and locked doors. As they met in their terror, they would have been listening for every foot step on the stairs, every knock at the door.

That is where Jesus finds them, cowering together in that room. All that he had taught them about God's power in adversity; all that he had said about rising again in three days; the entirety of his ministry of miracles and healing were forgotten in their fear and grief. Note that he doesn't remind them of all of that, nor does he chastise them for fleeing when things got tough.

Instead he offered them grace: God's unconditional love in an Easter Greeting "Peace be with you." He showed them his hands and feet, and they recognize him. He showed them that God's power was greater than locked doors and even death, as he now had conquered both.

Jesus once again offers them directions and authority to go into the world with God's message. He reminded them that it was God who had sent Christ and Christ who is sending them. He blew over them the breathe of the Holy Spirit and added to that the authority for them to forgive or retain the sins of those who they would encounter in the work they would do as they moved out into the world...

But they weren't all present: Thomas was dealing with his grief and fear apart from the support of the others. He missed Jesus' first visit to the disciples. His disbelief was still fresh and real as he tried to accept Christ's death. Thomas loved Jesus. He loved him enough to go to Jerusalem to die with him, when the other disciples had been hesitant and afraid.

But now since Jesus had died, he had been so broken hearted that he couldn't even meet the eyes of the others. He just wanted to be alone with his grief. So he wasn't present when Christ appeared to the disciples. When the others tell him that Jesus has risen, he doesn't dare to hope that it could be true. Thomas wanted that so bad that he declared to the rest that he wouldn't believe it unless he could actually touch Christ's wounds.

Thomas has gotten a poor reputation through the centuries as his name has become, to many 'Doubting Thomas.' He never lacked courage, but he was a natural pessimist. Thomas made one mistake. He withdrew from the Christian fellowship. He sought loneliness rather than togetherness. When sadness and sorrow comes it makes us want to shut ourselves away and refuse to meet with people. That is the very time that we should draw our strength from each other and that is when we can know the presence of Christ in our midst.

When Thomas does join the fellowship, that is when he experiences Christ's presence for himself. Jesus even offers the opportunity for Thomas to touch his wounds, but for Thomas seeing is believing and he doesn't need to touch. Seeing Christ is convincing enough of the horror of his death and the reality of his resurrection.

Within Thomas there are two immense qualities: He refused to say that he believed when he didn't believe. He didn't just go along with the others because of what they said. He had to know before he could accept it all. There was an inflexible sincerity about Thomas. There is more vital faith in a person who insists on being sure, than in a person who just repeats things that they haven't yet thought through or maybe don't really believe. The other great quality that Thomas possessed was that once he was sure, he was willing to stand by it as he stated "My Lord and my God." Once he knew and was sure, he made sure others heard his words of belief. Faith was never an easy thing for Thomas. He had to be sure, he had to count the costs. But once he was sure and had counted the cost, he was a faithful servant to Christ.

All of the disciples had followed Jesus for three years upon just his words, they had seen the healings and the miracles; they had also heard the predictions of his arrest and death – now they have experienced Christ's presence after his death and though they told Thomas that they had seen Christ, and they seemed to believe, it is now a week later and they are still locked in the room.

They had all received so much from Jesus, and now it was time for them all to leave that room, go and give. Have you ever been on the receiving end of God's grace through people wearing Christ's face? In my life God has sent many to offer me peace in the midst of crisis. When our home was destroyed by fire, our families stepped up to take care of us, as did others, but two gifts especially stand out: The first one was the green plaid flannel hand tied bed quilt that the Mennonite neighbors brought to us. That first night Bob and I just held on to each other, thankful to be alive. The quilt was, at that point the only thing that was ours. The next day the Red Cross arrived with a gift of money for us to buy some clothes.

We knew that there were many people who were behind the work to help make these two gifts to us possible. In the whole scheme of things these might be considered small gifts, but those who delivered them surely wore the face of God for us.

As God sent Christ to us, Christ sends us to the world. Jesus needs the church. He brought a message to all people, but all people would never know the message unless the church had and does go out with the message. Likewise the church needs Jesus; even today we know that we cannot go it alone. The work we do, we do with Christ. As God was dependant on Christ's willingness to follow God's will through perfect love, so does Christ depend on us to follow beyond what we know and understand right into the unbelievable parts of life.

There is a time when you know in your heart and your soul that the unbelievable is true, Christ is Risen, but then you have to learn to know with your eyes and your guts as well. What does it take for us to believe that Christ came to send us out into the world in peace and justice for others; knowing that there will be road blocks for us to encounter on the way, everything and anything from closed doors to possible pain and death?

Are we afraid to go out beyond our doors? And how will we see the needs if we stay hidden away from others? Does it really come down to believing the unbelievable, even when it is beyond understanding, and then doing something about it.

Until December of 2004, most of us had never even heard the word Tsunami. Then the Indian Ocean surged up and over the land. But then in March 2011 when it happened again, this time in Japan, all we could say was unbelievable. As the pictures came before our eyes, it was and is still beyond our understanding, but it somehow becomes more believable.

Living in Wisconsin, it may be hard for us to even imagine what strength and damage comes from a Hurricane, but we will never forget the pictures of the people of New Orleans as they tried to escape the waters, tried to find shelter and fresh water, and now have worked for over 12 years to rebuild their lives. I have never traveled to New Orleans, but you and I were there, through the work of the United Methodist Church's Committee on Relief: UMCOR. From the magazine 'United Methodist Reporter' dated Feb 2010 came this report:

"As the recovery work from Hurricane Katrina drags on into its fifth year, most relief money and volunteer help has shifted from places like New Orleans to more media-saturated, current disaster regions like quake-affected Haiti. Many people even find it hard to imagine that post-Katrina recovery work is still taking place. A few die-hard United Methodist volunteers, however, have not yet given up on "the least, the last and the lost" hit hard in 2005 by back-to-back hurricanes Katrina and Rita. United Methodists, in fact, are the last guard of post-Katrina recovery work.

The United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) has held their ground, sticking it out with the most difficult recovery cases, even as most charitable organizations have run out of funds or moved on to other pressing needs."

Our prayers, our support of others who went to work and our gifts for rebuilding is part of what Jesus was demonstrating to the disciples through his ministry, so they would go, and do likewise. When the community of Siren Wisconsin was devastated by tornado, I did get to go that time to help. When the Kickapoo River flooded the village of Gay Mills Wisconsin, two years in a row, I was able to go both times. But even when we can't travel to be there, we can still be there through the work of our church.

Just over one year later there was again an 8.2 magnitude earth quake in the Indian Ocean. Millions of people were evacuated this time, but no wave came. That is ok. But isn't it good to know that you were already there ready to help through your gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing and UMCOR

Coming out from behind a locked door, means letting go of the fear, accepting the peace God has offered to you through Christ and sharing it with others. If Thomas and the disciples hadn't gotten through that door, the knowledge of God that we have now would never have gotten to Hayward Wisconsin.

Still there are many that haven't heard or found ways to handle the traumas or any of the difficulties of life. They are depending on the knowledge and authority of what someone else has entered on the Wikipedia Website for their believability. That isn't a bad source – in most cases, but if you aren't checking it against some other sources, you might be hiding in a closed room.

If your believability comes only from the pictures you see on TV or in the advertisements on the billboards, there are better ways to know truth.

John Wesley listed four ways to judge truth for yourself: check it first with the 'scriptures.' What do you see from God there? The other three that Wesley lists are 'tradition' – what does history and how people have believed before now, tell you about this? 'experience'- What does your experience tell you? And 'reason' - Is what is unbelievable or believable also reasonable? Scripture, tradition, experience and reason.

Christ's whole life and ministry are reflected in this message he is giving to the disciples and to us in this resurrection time of Easter: "Go with peace and forgiveness, even if you are entering into the worst of life, as I am with you." Our lives are rich as we come to experience the believability of all Christ has to offer for us once we are brave enough to believe and unlock the doors and exit into the world.

The weather has been unbelievable all winter. Ask the Birkie skiers... Several times during March the wind blew so hard in Hayward. All I could pray was, "Lord, please protect us from fire." There are many unbelievable tragedies in life, but as the scripture says, "weeping may endure for the night, joy comes in the morning." Spring is the beginning again of new life, and like the daffodils we can begin to blossom once again.

Our God is the God of second chances. Jesus didn't admonish the disciples for hiding behind locked doors, he just once again encouraged them to go and live life beyond the door. That is an example of God's grace also offered to us as we hesitate to move beyond our fears. Just as Christ came to Thomas, Christ comes to us wherever we might be in our faith journey. Jesus offers himself over and over again to those who seek him.

The answers to our fear and doubt don't come because we seek the answers, but because God is always seeking us with answers. Are we living back on the other side of Easter or can we see beyond the cross to the resurrection?

The last two verses are especially for you and me. Hear them again: *"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."*