



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Eugene, Oregon
"At Home" Worship
April 11, 2021

Leading in Worship Today:
Ursula Damgaard, Director of Music
The Rev. Marta Z. Ukropina
Liturgist: Roger Keady
Vocalists: Tom and Katie Stocks
Steve and Jeanie Halberg

Gathering Around God's Word

Call to Worship

We worship in the Easter light,
for the shadow of death is no match for God's love.
Let us join our voices with the disciple Thomas:
"My Lord and my God!"
Easter people, Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed!

Opening Hymn

Christ is Risen! Shout Hosanna! #248

Call to Confession

God loves us just as we are, and God loves us too much to let us stay this way. God embraces our brokenness and enters our lives to mend what has been torn. Convinced by God's grace, let us

tell the truth about ourselves and our world as we confess our sins.

Prayer of Confession

Almighty God, in raising Jesus from the grave, you shattered the power of sin and death. We confess that we remain captive to doubt and fear, bound by the ways that lead to death. We overlook the poor and the hungry, and pass by those who mourn; we are deaf to the cries of the oppressed, and indifferent to calls for peace; we despise the weak, and abuse the earth you have made. Forgive us, God of mercy. Help us to trust your power to change our lives and make us new, that we may know the joy of life abundant given in Jesus Christ, the risen Lord. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. Know that you are forgiven and be at peace.

The Word

Prayer for Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.

New Testament 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.

Anthem

You are Holy

Sermon

“Doubting”

The Rev. Marta Z. Ukropina

Ah—the Sunday after Easter. Often referred to as “Associate Pastor Appreciation Sunday” or Cannon Sunday aptly named because after the crowds of Easter, you could fire a cannon through the sanctuary and not hit anyone. Both of these jokes always give us a good laugh on the Second Sunday of Easter, but It’s not really funny this year since every Sunday for the past year has been a cannon Sunday—at least from our perspective visually speaking here in the pulpit.

So although those jokes don’t really seem to work this year, what does seem to work is our Gospel reading on this second Sunday of Easter. We meet Jesus in a post-resurrection appearance to the disciples and I am going to focus this morning on the second half of the reading with his appearance to Thomas. When we hear the name Thomas we automatically think “doubting Thomas” which has a little bit of a negative connotation. Like, “can you believe that Thomas—he doubted Jesus even when he was standing right in front of him?!?”

Here’s the deal though—I personally find that Thomas is relatable. I mean goodness—doubting is a part of the human condition. And if there was ever a year to relate to Thomas more, it is this one. I don’t know about

you, but this past year has definitely been a year of doubt for me.

I have seen doubt all around us both personally and in our greater world throughout this pandemic:

At first we doubted that a virus could wreak such havoc on our lives. Many thought it would be over in a few short weeks a blip on the calendar.

There was doubt on masks at first. Then, as it became clear that masks work and would help keep everyone safe, people continued to doubt them and turned it into a political battle that honestly has worn me out. As Christians we are to love our neighbor and what better or easier way to do so than to wear a mask.

Then there was doubt that there would ever be an effective vaccine and now that we have one there are many who doubt that it even works. They doubt and do not trust the science and professionals that are racing against a deadly disease to help us all return to some kind of “normal” life.

We doubt the information that is given to us by leaders and public health officials. In fact, despite warnings that we need to hold on a little longer, mask up a little longer, social distance a little longer, keep from gathering in groups a little longer, people are growing antsy and throwing caution to the wind. Selfish needs and desires begin to override caring for “others.”

And many doubt a return to normal. After a year of pandemic fatigue and stress it is easy to err on the side of the negative. Perhaps it is our way of trying to protect ourselves from more disappointment and hardship. It is easy to find articles and voices that paint a negative picture stating that life will never be normal again.

And many have doubted the presence of God through all of this. They ask the age old question: how could a good and gracious God let so much suffering, division, and pain occur?

For me, the fact that Thomas doubts, makes him a person I feel like I can relate to. He was a genuine person who was forthcoming with his doubts. He was honest in the fact that he did not try to pretend that believing came easily for him. He questioned and he wanted some kind of proof.

Doubting and questioning are a normal part of all aspects of life and this includes our faith journeys. Faith is sometimes an ongoing discussion between our doubts and uncertainties. But it is sometimes in the midst of that discussion that we find our faith deepening and growing. Thomas is a perfect example of someone whose faith carried with it a discussion of his doubts and uncertainties—and it is in that questioning that he was able to confess “my Lord and my God.”

But, this story that we have come to know as Doubting Thomas really is not so much about Thomas as it is about Jesus. We are told in the passage that Jesus appeared to the disciples in the house showing them his side and his hands. But we also learn that one of the disciples is not there—Thomas. So, the next time the disciples see Thomas, they tell him the good news. They tell Thomas what they have seen and heard but he is skeptical. Thomas wants to have the experience for himself. Thomas wants to be able to reach out and touch Jesus—to really experience the risen Lord. I mean honestly, can you imagine? He must have felt just a little bit left out! So the next week the disciples are together in the house again—including Thomas—and Jesus appears to them a second time. Jesus knows just what Thomas needs and he says to him “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe!”

Jesus knew Thomas needed reassurance. What was important to Jesus was not how Thomas arrived at his belief, but that he believed. If you notice, Jesus initiates the whole thing. Thomas does not even get a chance to ask Jesus if he can touch him. After greeting the disciples, Jesus turns to Thomas and invites him to touch him. Jesus met Thomas where he was and gave Thomas just what he needed to move from his doubt and uncertainty to his confession of “my lord and my God.” If Jesus cared so much for Thomas’ faith, then he must care just as much for our faith.

Isn’t it great that our faith in the Risen Lord and in God is NOT dependent on our limited human understanding? Instead it has everything to do with God’s love, mercy, and claim for and on all of us. We can doubt as much as we want, but God will never doubt us. God knows what we need and meets us where we are even if that place is a place of doubt and uncertainty. Thomas says “my Lord and my God.” What an amazing statement of faith. It is a statement of faith that can be cried out in the midst of our doubt and despair and in the midst of pain and heartache.

If we aren’t careful when we read this text, verse 29 can sound harsh towards those of us who doubt. Jesus says “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” But, this is really a blessing that Jesus gives us. Jesus is telling all of us that having a relationship with him is not limited to those who had the firsthand knowledge of seeing him. It is an amazing gift, because although we do not get to see Jesus in the same way Thomas saw him, we receive the gift of faith and grace here today. God has given us the gift of the church, the words of Scripture, the example of the saints, mentors in the faith, people who love and uphold us, to be with us throughout our lives and throughout our periods of doubt and uncertainty.

And this holds true today as we live in such a time of doubt and uncertainty. God is here with us—meeting us where we are. God is with all of us as we worship apart from one another; working in and through us in ways that we do not even realize. I truly believe that we must have faith and hope that there will be a return to more normal life. We will gather together in this sanctuary again. The hope and miracle of Easter is perhaps a great starting point for all of us as we try to move from living in doubt to living with our doubts. Our doubts are not going to go anywhere, but we can learn to not let them control us. Living *in* doubt takes on that negative connotation of not believing, being the skeptic about everything, walking around with a little storm cloud over our heads. Living *in* doubt can make us angry and resentful. The hope and joy seem to vanish when we live *in* doubt. Despair can take over.

On the other hand, living *with* our doubts allows us to claim them, to recognize they are there, but also it allows us to strive to remember the promises made to us in Christ. Living *with* our doubts opens up to the possibility of new discovery and faith. When we live *with* our doubts we do not let them control us. We do not give into despair. This is not always an easy task, but with God's help it is possible! Living with our doubts allows us to continue to put one foot in front of the other as we journey through what is hopefully the end of separation due to the pandemic. Jesus is there, walking with us, meeting us where we are giving us all we need so that we, too, with Thomas can confess: "My Lord and my God!"

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

Responding to God's Word

Affirmation of Faith

This is the good news which we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved, if we hold it fast: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared first to the women, then to Peter, and to the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus Christ is the first and the last, the beginning and the end; he is our Lord and our God. Amen.

Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Holy God, in Jesus Christ you taught us to pray, and to offer our petitions to you in his name. Guide us by your Holy Spirit, that our prayers for others may serve your will and show your steadfast love; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God our Creator, we pray for the whole creation. Instill in us the conviction to tend to it so that all your children may freely enjoy the earth you have made, and joyfully sing your praises.

O God, whom we cannot love unless we love our neighbors, remove hate and prejudice from us and from all people, so that your children may be reconciled with those we fear, resent, or threaten; and live together in your peace.

Almighty God, you bear the pain of the world. Look with compassion on those who are sick, especially those on our hearts and minds today.. Bring healing and comfort as a sign of your grace; thorough Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of comfort, stand with those who sorrow that

they may be sure that neither death no life, nor things present nor things to come, shall separate us from your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray together:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Closing Hymn:

Thine is the Glory

#238

Benediction

Go into the world in peace. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your would, with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself. Amen.