

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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April 19, 2009  
*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter*  
John 20:19-31

### **Marks of Faith**

The central truth of Easter is that God defeated death when Jesus was raised from the dead after he had been crucified. That Jesus overcame death itself, the powers of those opposed to him were effectively neutralized. What could the religious leaders do now? Ask Pilate to crucify Jesus again? What would that accomplish?

It's worth pointing out that among the handful of appearances in the Bible of the resurrected Jesus, all of them are appearances to Jesus' followers. There are no reports of Jesus, after he had been raised from the dead, appearing before the Jewish scribes and pharisees. No mention of the resurrected Jesus encountering Pontius Pilate or any of the other Roman authorities involved in putting him to death. There are no public appearances. Jesus didn't merely pick himself up after the crucifixion, dust himself off, and then resume his ministry as he had pursued it during the 3 years leading up to his death. He didn't say, "Whew! I'm glad that's over. Now that I've been to the tomb and back, let's get back to work."

The resurrection of Jesus was not like a magician's amazing trick before a large and enthralled audience where he disappears in one location and reappears in another with no clear explanation as to how it was done, leaving the audience to wonder aloud in amazement with "oohs and ahs."

The appearances of Jesus to his followers are spotty and seemingly random. And yet, the resurrection of Jesus changed everything.

Today in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel we read of two such resurrection appearances of Jesus. The first of the two occurs on that first evening of the day that the tomb in which Jesus' body had been placed was found empty and devoid of any remains, with the revelation that Jesus was not dead, but alive—raised from the dead. We read that the disciples were gathered in a locked room. They were hiding there in fear and trembling as they sorted out what had happened.

Although immediately preceding in this gospel is an account of an appearance of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene; and although Jesus talks to her and tells her to go to the rest of the disciples and report to them that she had seen Jesus; and although she does this, the disciples are fearful and unsettled—clearly unbelieving that Jesus was alive—and have hidden themselves away behind a locked door for fear for their own lives. It is into this scene that Jesus appears to them in their midst in spite of the bolted door.

After all that the disciples had been through from the time Jesus was taken from them and through his crucifixion and death, they were clearly in a state of panic and shock. It must have felt to them like the very foundation of their lives had collapsed beneath them. What were they to do now? Even the disciple Peter who had time and again shown leadership potential must have lost any and all confidence in himself after he had found himself publically denying that he had known Jesus at all. And furthermore, after what had happened to Jesus, what was to prevent them from facing a similar fate due to their

close and intimate association with Jesus? It's no wonder that they were hidden away in a house behind locked doors.

What happened to these defeated and fearful disciples on the evening of that first Easter Sunday is indicative of what God had been doing with God's people from the beginning, as well as how Jesus acts from that day to the present day. He came to them where they were in the midst of their despair. He didn't wait for them to come looking for him. In spite of the reports of the women who had been at the empty tomb early that morning, in spite of their reports that they had been told that Jesus was not dead, in spite of the disciples' disbelief, Jesus came to them with gentleness and the words, "Peace be with you." And then to convince them that he was not a ghost or a spirit apparition, he's said to have shown them his scarred hands and side where his physical body had been mortally wounded in the crucifixion. It's like Jesus anticipated their disbelief and so shows them what they need in order to believe that it was true that their Lord, Jesus, who had died and who had been buried, was now in their midst to inspire and equip them to carry on with what they had begun together.

It's what Jesus continues to do with his followers up to the current day. Sometimes—dare I say oftentimes—we get this sequence backwards. We get this idea that unless we are pursuing Jesus, Jesus leaves us alone. We take the human logic that is so much a part of our modern and western way of understanding the world and we attempt to apply it to our Christian discipleship. Sometimes we get into a transactional mode that hoodwinks us into believing that Jesus is there for us when, and only when, we call upon him. And by extension, when we don't call upon him, or we live our lives in spite of Jesus, we think that Jesus is out of the way, out of our lives, and even, dare I say, irrelevant.

Nothing could be further from the truth about how Jesus reaches out to us. It is precisely when the disciples have given up and given in to the fear that the world lays upon them that Jesus breaks through the barriers that they have erected around them—in this case a room secured with locks.

The second appearance of Jesus that follows the first, but a week later, demonstrates this tenacious pursuit by Jesus. In this case the disciples are in the house again—no mention of locks this time although the doors were closed—and Jesus comes into their midst again with the same words, "Peace be with you." And then he turns to the disciple named Thomas who had not been there the last time Jesus had appeared, and he provides Thomas with what he needs in order to believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead—in this case inviting Thomas to physically touch the scars of the crucifixion on Jesus' body. The result is that Thomas is the first of the disciples to declare that not only does he believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead, he declares the oneness of Jesus with God. Thomas says, "My Lord and my God!"

This story in John's gospel has often been called the story of "doubting Thomas." But I would submit that this story is less about Thomas' doubt and more about Jesus coming to a disciple, providing him with what he needs to believe, so that that belief is made stronger and more complete.

This is a story of encouragement to all those who follow Jesus to this day. The experience we have of the resurrected Jesus is not a one-size-fits-all experience and Jesus

knows that. Jesus, in his relentless pursuit of us, will come to us in ways that will speak most clearly to us, depending on our circumstances. Jesus' words to Thomas are words to us and about us, all these 2000 years later. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (Jn. 20:29b) Jesus is talking about you and me right there, for we believe without having seen Jesus in the flesh.

There's one more thing about this story that is jam-packed with meaning. After Jesus had shown up that first evening, the time when the doors were locked, he did something that is significant, both then as well as now.

After his initial greeting of, "Peace be with you," he commissions the disciples for their work as Jesus' followers. "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.'" (Jn. 20:22-23) This is the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit according to John's gospel. Whereas in the other gospels, the coming of the Holy Spirit didn't come until Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus. But here in John's account, the disciples were empowered and equipped from the get-go of the resurrection. It's like there was no time to wait to get on with the pressing need to share the amazing news of God's incredible love shown to the world in Jesus, and in Jesus' overcoming death.

The disciples may have begun that first Easter day with fear and trembling and a sense of defeat and despair. But those disciples ended it with the empowerment that comes from seeing their risen Lord and receiving the power and commission of the Holy Spirit that fully equips them for the rest of their earthly lives.

My friends, we are the people of Easter, the people of God, and the people God empowers with the Holy Spirit. Jesus has sought us out on our terms and has fully convinced us of the veracity of the eternal life that comes from Jesus' resurrection with marks of faith that speak to us. How can we possibly hide out behind locked doors?

As we move into this season of Easter, let's do so with a renewed sense of commitment that as we live out our faith through this congregation we will help others to discover Jesus who is seeking them out right now, right where they are in the midst of what they're doing. For as we let the marks of faith we have show, the marks of faith of the risen Christ will show, and belief will grow.