

“Ever Present, Ever New, Ever Available”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, April 23, 2017

Second Sunday of Easter

Readings from Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3-9 and John 20:19-31

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:3-9

Let us pray. May your Spirit, Gracious God, move among us as we read your word, as we proclaim your word. May your Spirit inspire us and move us toward discipleship. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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.

John 20:19-31

Thomas, I think, has received bad press—bad unwarranted press throughout the centuries of Christian history—Doubting Thomas we have come to label him, like it's a kind of epithet, an unfortunate one in my mind because it falsely isolates Thomas from the rest of the disciples, all of whom, after all, had been skeptical of Mary Magdalene's initial proclamation when she came rushing back from the tomb. "I have seen the Lord." It seems as if they, too, had not believed. Not until Jesus appeared to them and showed them, it is recorded, his wounded hands and side. So I want to suggest that the central concern in this passage is not that Thomas, or even the other disciples, doubted. The central concern, instead, is to show that the resurrected Jesus is ever present, ever new, ever available. You see, the Gospel of John was written probably near the end of the first century, a generation removed from the human presence of Jesus. It was written to those who had not "seen the Lord". And these first readers of the Gospel of John were asked then to conclude that knowledge of and relationship with Jesus was not limited to those first disciples. And so when hearing this story, we, too, in our generation can be assured that we also can know and experience the risen Christ, know and experience resurrection and new life. That is the hope and the promise that is contained in this story of the disciples, including Thomas. This story is not about judgment or recrimination, but hope and promise. For, indeed, the revelation of the risen Christ is ever present and ever new.

It is our conviction, you see, as followers of Jesus, that the Holy Spirit is active and alive and evermore at work in this present world. Evermore at work with the astounding compassion and the unconditional love and grace and forgiveness that is at the very heart of the gospel message of Jesus—that is at the very heart of Jesus himself. Compassion, not mean-spiritedness, but compassion, inclusion and welcome, not self-righteousness and exclusion—embracing the basic humanity and God-created life of all with respect and with grace and with transforming power. These are the qualities that are evidence of the resurrected Christ in our midst. It is compassion and welcome, loving grace that is at the heart of the work of the resurrected Jesus. And that is why, you see, this sanctuary rang with the music last Sunday of "Jesus Christ is Risen Today". Today, alleluia! Alleluia! And it is this core message of compassion and forgiveness and grace embodied in Jesus. It is this that we are asked to trust. Indeed, that we are asked to stake our very lives upon. Yes, even when we are having trouble seeing it. To trust and believe that God's love has prevailed and will prevail. And as followers we have that awesome calling of bearing witness to the compassionate work of this risen Christ in this world.

A Jesuit Catholic priest named Father Gregory Boyle has written a book entitled Tattoos on the Heart. It's a book that details his experience of ministering in the very heart of gang territory in Los Angeles, California. Ministering to gang members within that violent, distorted context in which they lived—the Home Boys, they call themselves, Homies for short. The book is filled with story after story of his ministry both with the gangs and with the members of Dolores Mission in Los Angeles of which he was the pastor—stories that do not always have a good end. Nonetheless,

sometimes, as with any ministry, the Spirit of God breaks through. More often than we probably are aware of, the Spirit of God breaks through in dramatic fashion into our tattered lives.

He relates one of those stories, about two of the Home Boys, named Julian and Mateo. Now Father Boyle had been asked to give a talk in Helena, Montana, about his ministry. So he decides that he will take Julian and Mateo with him. Boyle is dealing with a serious health issue with leukemia at the time and he is glad to have their company and support. He is also glad to have them come and to testify to their experience. He writes that both Julian and Mateo are what we can call "YA Babies". That is that they have essentially grown up in Youth Authority Facilities, because their home situations were so bad. Father Boyle comments that kids were simply not meant to grow up in that kind of context. And of course, they both end up in gangs in Los Angeles—two different gangs.

So now each of them, at the age of 19 years, have missed a lot of life by being incarcerated so much of the time over the previous four to five years. However, now they are out and they are involved with Boyle's ministry called "Home Boy Industries". So they board a plane with Father Boyle and fly to Helena, Montana. When they land in Helena there is snow everywhere. This is not Los Angeles anymore. There is snow everywhere which turns out to be its own blessing, because before their presentation, these two young men got a hold of two plastic sleds and, as Father Boyle writes, they lived an entire childhood in one afternoon that had been previously denied them. Before their talk at the University, they are interviewed by the local newspaper in Helena and pictures are taken and then they go to the University. After Father Boyle's talk, Julian and Mateo speak movingly about their experience and about their lives. They are given a standing ovation. The packed crowd, it seems, has so much honor and reverence for what these two abandoned kids have had to endure in their young lives.

The next day, before they begin their trip back home and still at the hotel, they see the morning newspaper. On the front page of the Helena newspaper is a photograph of the three of them—four columns wide—standing in the cold, wearing Home Boy Industry beanies and jackets. The headline is "Gang Members Visit Helena with a Message of Hope." Julian and Mateo can hardly believe it. And, of course, they squirrel away as many copies as they can find. People in the hotel and in the restaurant and in the airport recognize them and greet them like they are some kind of celebrity, stopping them and shaking their hands, and congratulating them and even the flight attendants make a big deal about the "celebrities on board" as they settle into their seats at the back of the commuter plane.

Midway back to Los Angeles, Father Boyle looks across the aisle and he sees Julian sound asleep. But he looks at Mateo, and Mateo has tears running down his face. "What's wrong?" he asks. Mateo has the Montana newspaper in his lap. "I just read this article again," he says. And then he can't go on for some time because of his crying. He silently places his hand over his heart and then he finally says, "I don't know. It really gets to me. It makes me feel like I am somebody." And he cries all the more. Father Boyle leans across the aisle and whispers to him, "That's because you are somebody." *That's because you are somebody.* Julian and Mateo are transformed, you see, by the power of love and the power of grace. Julian and Mateo are made in the precious image of a compassion-filled God. They are made from that deep, deep well of unimaginable unconditional

love. Julian and Mateo are transformed, you see, and made new by the Spirit of the risen Christ, the Spirit of the risen Christ which never, ever gave up on them until they were able to see. And alongside of that was the believing faith of Father Boyle who could somehow see beyond the stereotypes, could see beyond the label of gang members and who was committed to bearing witness to resurrection life. These two young men lived most of their lives on the violent edge of our society, in trouble most of the time.

But blessed are those, said Jesus in our scripture lesson this morning, blessed are those who have come to believe. Home Boy Industries believed in them. Father Boyle believed in them. And Julian and Mateo, who had been on the outside, found themselves invited and welcomed inside. And a new song is sung. We, too, can have that kind of faith. We are called to that kind of faith, to see and to believe. So yes, indeed, in the opening words of our first hymn, "Christ is risen, shout hosanna!" Be alert for the stirring, compassionate activity of the Spirit of the risen Christ and when you find it, celebrate. Celebrate. Amen.