

Jesus Alters You  
John 20: 19-31  
Preached at Rockland Congregational Church  
April 7, 2013 by Rev. Lois Coppola

Here we are on the first Sunday AFTER Easter. I don't know about you but often with grand holidays such as Christmas and Easter, once they pass what happened a week ago feels like a very long time ago. So, in order to "get back" to the emotional state of today's scripture lets try to go back to the roller coaster ride of Holy Week; Palm Sunday and Holy Week were filled with dramatic scenes: Jesus' triumphal entry ; a parade where we shouted with loud hosanna's and waving palms as a new king arrives in Jerusalem, then a few days later we are in the upper room where the last supper enlightens us of the events that will unfold through the evening; Jesus' betrayal by Judas and his denial by Peter. We can easily imagine the scenes, maybe because they have been told over and over to us of how Jesus was condemned and crucified.

If any of you have been watching The Bible on the history channel you were able to enter the story from your living room as it unfolded; it was almost unbearable to watch our Lord being tried, mocked, flogged and whipped. How he stumbles as he carries his cross and the agony of his death.

Then Easter arrives! For us over 2000 years later it becomes a true day of celebration; our holiest day of all. We rejoice and sing alleluia! Christ has Risen Indeed we exclaim!

But the story today from John's Gospel is still hanging on to the grief and disbelief.

If you have ever experienced the loss of a loved one very close to you, maybe a parent, a spouse or child then you understand how these disciples are feeling and how Thomas is feeling...a week, a month a year and the events of a terrible loss feel like yesterday the months and days leading up to the loss are still very vivid are they not...it is like we relive it on purpose because it is the best way we can stay close to the one who is no longer with us.

In the first half of today's reading we need to remember it is on the evening of Easter day. The disciples have "heard" from Mary Magdalene that Jesus has Risen but they remain fearful huddling themselves in a locked room afraid that the Jewish authorities might arrest and condemn them too. And I can only imagine that awful sense of guilt they are feeling too..."how could we deny him, it's our own fault he died, we did not save him."

Suddenly Jesus appears to them and there is this wonderful scene where Jesus grants them peace and tells them he trusts them to minister to others in his name. "Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me I send you." Then he fills them with his Spirit and asks them to minister the power of God's love and forgiveness .

Then we learn that Thomas was absent and he struggles to believe what the others have told them, that Jesus is Alive! (Of course earlier the disciples struggled with believing Mary).

The second scene occurs a week later, just like us now.... Here we are, a week later.

A week ago I was in North Carolina celebrating Easter with my son Paul and his wife Sara. I woke up with the oft sung "Christ the Lord is Risen todayyyy" resounding in my head. We went to church that morning with about 5 or 6 hundred others at a service being held in a large school auditorium.

The service felt like a mix of a rock concert and a theater and I'll be honest I was skeptical I wanted my traditional setting with traditional music like the song my heart woke up to in my head and the preacher a few feet away and not on a screen being projected from another location...their pastor was at the church several miles away where another several hundred people were also in attendance. So I prayed, I prayed that I could be open to this experience, I prayed that I could let go of the feelings of doubt that I had because this is not the "Easter" I know. I prayed that I could receive the message of Easter in this new and strange place rather than closing myself to it by wishing I were someplace else, like Rockland Congregational...

As I looked around me I witnessed young families, middle agers and grander aged folks praising God with music, with movement and prayer. Many held their Bibles whether the traditional

“book” or with Ipads and Iphones ready to follow along when the pastor cued them to selections of scripture.

I realized then that I was doubtful because I was afraid I was going to miss what I had grown to love. I was not in my “comfort zone.”

That’s where doubt comes from; fear; fear of being away from the comforts we know. Fear that x y and Z will happen rather than A b and C

With my prayer said I began to engage with my surroundings and loosen up to the music. The sermon was tremendous as the Pastor preached how Jesus rose to raise us. I left feeling filled with the spirit and a new song in my head.

On Easter morning I also woke with the title of this sermon in my head. The dream itself is vague but the words were clear “Jesus Alters You.” And He does.

It is now a week later. The festivities have ended, visiting folks have traveled back home, a few chocolate eggs wrapped in pastel foil might still be lingering in a bowl but we are back to our daily routine trying our very best to “believe”.

John’s gospel uses the word believe, believer or believed at least 87 times. In comparison Matthew uses these words 9 times, Mark 15 times and Luke 10.

Without a ‘doubt’ John’s gospel has a purpose (how did you like that play on words?). And that purpose is that we would become believers. He states his purpose in chapter 1 vs 7 when he introduces John the Baptist saying, “He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through Him all might believe.”

Then we reach the end of the Gospel and we hear about the doubting disciple. We Hear Jesus say “stop doubting and believe!”

What I love about this particular story is that it resonates with all of us; at least I know it does for me.

Doubting is what we do best. We doubt we can measure up, we doubt we are loved, we doubt our intelligence, we doubt our abilities. And yes, sometimes I wonder “could this stuff about God be true?”

I don't know if you have noticed this but nearly every department store or gift shop I enter they are selling appealing signs and plaques that say “Believe” like this one. Even the world of marketing has realized we need a way to remind ourselves that we believe. It is true that for each person that hangs one of those decorative plaques in their house there is a variety of beliefs they are trying to hold on to...but for me it represents what I believe; that I do believe in the Risen One; that I believe Jesus has changed me and everyday Jesus alters me. Yes, Everyday Jesus alters me and you!

And you know what...every day I need it. Just like Thomas I struggle at times. We all do.

Fear, anxiety and doubt creep up on us every day, especially when we are out of our comfort zone but even when things are going along as ordinary as ever. And the God we believe in knows and understands this so much that He sent his Son, John reminds us once again in 3:16 so that we would “believe in Him and have everlasting life.”

The writer of this Gospel also knows we will have our times of doubt. Thomas is mentioned two other times in chapter 11 he is ready to run with Jesus to see Lazarus despite how dangerous it will be for them and in chapter 14 when Jesus is explaining where he is going, to God's kingdom in heaven and that they will know the way Thomas say “how?” Thomas is just like us on fire and ready one minute and questioning the next then in total disbelief unless he witnesses the truth with his own eyes! I know I can be like that too: feeling lifted after worship then feeling distanced and wondering what direction to turn...are you real Jesus? Are you really still Alive?

Jesus rose so that we would also rise with Him. That is our Easter message.

When He appeared to his disciples he released them of the feeling of guilt by granting them peace and trusting them to preach the Good news of his Resurrection. When he appeared again to Thomas he erased his doubt by granting him proof of His resurrection and then He blessed all who would come to believe without seeing.

Even if we need to become believers over and over, even if we need signs like this to remind us, even if we stumble and fall, even if we are skeptical of being in a place where praising God be and feeling His Spirit present. Even if we are grieving deep loss, feeling shame or guilt or unworthiness; Jesus rose so that we would also rise. Jesus is Alive.

We celebrate the day of Resurrection with grandness. All over the world Christians “sang aloud” with Alleluia’s that Christ is risen. Whether it was in a church like here in Rockland or a school auditorium like the one I attended in North Carolina, whether it was on a sandy beach or in a mountainside canyon, or a grand cathedral or a prison cell, or the war torn desert or an icy tundra, people around the world were celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus Christ! That Jesus is Alive!

Jesus changed the disciples on that evening of the first Easter and changed Thomas too from a skeptic to a believer. And because he did that for them, he did it for us too. He also grants us peace, redeems us and sends us forth.

Despite or moments of unbelief we can come together and strengthen each other. When we worship together, when we share our own faith stories, when we console each other’s grief, when we pray for our community and the world, when we celebrate and lift up each other we are proclaiming what we believe, as John says, “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.” We have been granted peace, we are forgiven and now we can go forth in the name of our Risen Savior because He has Altered us, changed us and made us whole.

Let us now come to the Table where we are reminded each time we partake of the broken bread and the fruit of the vine that

Jesus is the Christ and He rose so we would also rise with Him and have everlasting life.

Jesus Alters YOU. Amen.