

Sermon for March 30, 2008

Readings: 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Rev. Eldonna Hazen

“Reasonable Doubt”

Let us pray: May the words of our mouths and the meditation in our hearts always be acceptable to You, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

Travel with me for a moment, back in time. Let us imagine how it might have felt to be Thomas. The disciples are locked in a room, probably frightened about what has happened, concerned about their behavior and their association with Jesus. Who appears in the room, but Jesus. He says, *“Peace be with you.”* He shows the disciples his wounds. No questioning here, they have SEEN! Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them and tells them *‘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.’*

Ok, so far so good. But Thomas was not present. Now the disciples tell Thomas about the whole scene, and he says, RIGHT! SURE! *‘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.’* Is Thomas response really so unbelievable? The disciples had been a community. They prayed together, they helped the needy, they worshipped and praised God together. And now, Thomas has been left out.

Apparently Jesus didn’t think it was so unbelievable either, because he came back to show Thomas his hands and his side. Not only did he come back to show Thomas, but he uses the same language, *“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.’* Jesus encourages Thomas to believe, not to doubt. But Jesus does not leave Thomas stranded either. He responds to his doubt. And because of Jesus’ return, Thomas became stronger in his faith. What is reasonable doubt?

A defendant was on trial for murder. There was strong evidence indicating guilt, but there was no corpse. In the defense's closing statement the lawyer, knowing that his client would probably be convicted, resorted to a trick: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I have a surprise for you all," the lawyer said as he looked at his watch. "Within one minute, the person presumed dead in this case will walk into this courtroom."

He looked toward the courtroom door. The jurors, somewhat stunned, all looked on eagerly. A minute passed. Nothing happened. Finally the lawyer said, "Actually, I made up the previous statement. But you all looked on with anticipation. I therefore put it to you that there is reasonable doubt in this case as to whether anyone was killed and insist that you return a verdict of not guilty."

The jury, clearly confused, retired to deliberate. A few minutes later, the jury returned and pronounced a verdict of guilty. "But how?" inquired the lawyer. "You must have had some doubt, I saw all of you stare at the door."

The jury foreman replied: "Oh, we looked, but your client didn't."

What is reasonable doubt? Apparently, the lawyer's client had seen also, so there was no reason for him to question. So, was there reason for Thomas to question? Thomas didn't question Jesus. Thomas questioned the other disciples. Thomas questioned his friends. Did Thomas question his faith? Maybe, but I feel bold enough to say that if Thomas were in this sanctuary today, he would certainly not be alone in doubting his faith. Thomas questioned and demanded answers. God gives us a model in Thomas. Thomas is a powerful reminder of the importance of asking questions, making demands, and persevering until you get an answer! Of course he was fortunate to get his answer in just a week; and none of us should count on receiving any answers in a set time frame.

We celebrated the work that Dr. Allen has done this morning. Dr. Allen questioned and demanded answers. He questioned "the system." He did not accept that God's work was being done appropriately for the veterans and he ACTED! He enlisted help, and persevered until he got an appropriate response.

Jesus didn't simply appear to the disciples and to Thomas; he breathed on them and sent them as his representatives on earth. The breath of God is the creative power of God, power to change lives and even to change societies. Jesus didn't breathe on just one person; he breathed on the whole group. He created a community of change which changed lives, endured, and changed society. For centuries now this community of change, the church, has wavered between challenging the social order and surrendering to it, on the one hand calling forth the most truly human behavior and on the other hand both justifying and ignoring horrendous behavior by both church and state. I am also proud to say the United Church of Christ has been consistent in challenging the social order. However that consistency has not come without its trials and tribulations, as we have recently been bombarded as a denomination.

Thomas wasn't physically present for this commissioning, but he was included. He was fully a member of the community of Jesus. We weren't physically present for this commissioning either, but we are included. We have Thomas' example. He freely voiced his reaction to hearing of Jesus' appearance when he was absent. The Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Morris Downie says, referring to Thomas, "He thus shows us how to ask bold questions, to demand proof, to pull aside the curtains that principalities and powers drape over their leaders, and to pay attention to the ones behind the curtains. Our world and our church desperately need faithful followers of Jesus to do these things, and more."¹

Travel back in time with me again. Be a disciple! Be Thomas! Doubt! Demand proof! Challenge "the system"! Feel the Holy Spirit breathed into you, into this church, into this community! Have faith in Jesus, who comes to answer our questions, our doubts. Who breathes new life into us, as he has had new life breathed into him. Have faith in Jesus, who sends the disciples into the world with these words, *'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'*

¹ Rev. Elizabeth Morris Downie, Published by The Witness (www.thewitness.org), March 24, 2005.

Now, fast forward to today, bring that experience with you. We ARE the disciples. We have been commissioned, **Jesus says to us, 'Peace be with you. As the God has sent me, so I send you.'** Have faith in Jesus, who returns, because he loves us. Have faith that with God's help, we CAN make changes as a community. We can doubt our friends. We can question "the systems." And know that Jesus brought PEACE to the disciples. Three times in this passage we heard Jesus say "*Peace be with you!*" There is a sense of peace that comes with Jesus entering a room, being alive, and empowering the disciples. It will be through our reasonable doubt that we WILL gain peace! It is through our own peace, that we will change the church, the community, and the world! Amen.