

Series: Lessons from the Lectionary

Today: Resurrection Faith: Show Me or Say So

Text: John 20:19-31

**A Communion Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, May 1, 2011 (Second Sunday in Easter)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

The Sunday after Easter is affectionately known as “empty tomb Sunday” by many of my colleagues in the ministry. The euphemism has nothing to do with the resurrection. It has to do with attendance. As full as this church was a week ago, there is usually a noticeable drop in our attendance the Sunday following Easter and hence the title: “Empty Tomb.”

It is not unusual for Senior Pastors to take a break from preaching the week after Easter, but when I found my son would be presenting the text for the morning in a dramatic form, I just couldn't resist a father/son opportunity to share the stage with him. So while my presentation will likely pale in comparison to my very gifted son, I want to spend a few moments with you thinking about *“Resurrection Faith: Show Me or Say So.”*

The dialogue between Thomas and Jesus after Jesus has been raised from the dead is a story of striking contrasts. Here we are, just one week after we have proclaimed the good news of Easter, and the Common Lectionary invites us to identify with Thomas who has trouble believing that Jesus made good on his word to rise from the dead in three days. The faith of Thomas which speaks for many of us when it comes to believing in the resurrection; if it is really true, **SHOW ME!** In contrast there is the call of Christ that if our faith means anything in our lives, then it is our responsibility to **SAY SO!**

It isn't one or the other. It is both. The text acknowledges the ambivalence many feel when they hear the Easter story, and it meets that ambivalence head on. Then it challenges us to do something with the power offered us by the risen Christ.

Show Me

Thomas is not the bad guy in this story. He is consistent with our earlier meeting of him in the 14th chapter of John's gospel. You remember that story. Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them and if he goes and prepares a place for them he will come again and take them to himself that where he is, there they will be also. He tells them that they know the way to the place where he is going. Thomas speaks for all of us who are unwilling to take things at face value. He says, *"Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* He was the one who raised difficult questions then and the one who raises them now.

When his friends tell him what they have seen and heard, Thomas speaks for many here when he says, *"I'll believe it when I see it with my own eyes and touch it with my own hands."* I find the inclusion of this text to be very comforting. Some people are able to believe without seeing, but for the Thomas's among us, this is a story for those who need to see in order to believe. It is there in scripture for us to show us that God understands the human condition.

New Testament scholars believe that it was probably included to deal with a heresy that was being promoted in the young Christian church which said that Jesus did not really suffer on the cross; that he really did not live as we live here on earth. To this heresy the church says NO! The risen Christ bears human scars. Only a wounded God can save; that by his stripes we are healed (I Peter 2:24).

Thomas speaks for all of us who need to know that the God we worship fully understands the human condition. I find it refreshing that Jesus meets Thomas at the point of his need and meets us at the point of our need in order that we might believe.

William Willimon illustrates this point with a story from his own ministry. In his church there was a woman who had been assaulted, in her own back yard, at ten in the morning. Willimon says it was

a terrible thing, but with the help of a good counselor, a loving husband, and an understanding family, she made her way back.

One day she called Dr. Willimon to say that her counselor wanted her to tell someone what had happened to her; someone other than a member of her family or a pastor. It was a part of her therapy. She said she had decided who that person would be, and Dr. Willimon assumed it would be another woman; perhaps someone who had gone through the same thing. To his surprise, she said, *“No. I want to tell my story to Joe Smith.”*

Willimon said he was incredulous. Joe Smith was a sometimes recovering, often not recovering, alcoholic. He had held and lost four jobs in as many years. He said to her, *“I would have thought you might want to tell your story to another woman. Why did you pick Joe Smith?”* *“Because,”* said the woman, *“Joe Smith knows what it is like to go to hell and live to tell about it.”* (Source: *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 25 #2, p. 5).

Jesus lets us know that God understands what it means to go to hell and live to tell about it. He shows Thomas his scars.

Say So

However, he also offers all the disciples the gift of peace. When he greets them, he says, *“Peace be with you.”* It is a greeting that reminds us that his is the challenge all of us who have experienced the risen Christ have. We are to bring the peace of God into the world in which we live.

Peace here is not the absence of conflict. It is much more active than that. It is a world where there is no need for conflict because people respect one another, care for one another, and love one another. It is what the Holy Spirit brings according to the writer of John. It was promised in the 17th chapter of John, and it is spoken in this 20th chapter by the risen Christ. We are challenged to bring this kind of peace into the world.

We begin by meeting the world on its terms; by listening to its needs and responding with a proclamation of the Good News in language the world can understand. At this church we have incorporated it into our vision statement: to discover the heart of Christ in the heart of the city. We are to bring the kind of peace into the city of Lancaster by respecting other people in their cultural expressions and challenge them to live lives fully as reflections of the grace of God. It is our intention to listen to the needs around us and respond with programs which contribute to the Shalom of God. We intend to be active, not passive. We intend to get involved with people at the point of their need and minister to them as if we were ministering to Jesus Christ, himself.

During WWII Winston Churchill allowed enlisted men to join with the officers in tactical sessions and briefings. He took a lot of criticism for that decision. One British general protested, "*Mister Prime Minister, you know it's a fact that familiarity breeds contempt.*" To which Churchill responded, "*My dear sir, I beg you to consider the fact that without a certain amount of familiarity, it is impossible to breed anything.*"

If there is one thing in our ministry here it is familiarity; with each other and with this city where we are placed to serve. Every day we have people walk through our doors with stories that would make you cringe. It is hard to listen to them because they make you feel so helpless. They are stories of abuse and neglect; stories of loneliness and isolation; stories of human need the likes of which most of us will never know.

We need to work together to bring the peace of God into the heart of this city, and we cannot bring the Shalom of God without getting involved the needs of others. Do you remember how the early Christian church was known? "*See how they love one another.*"

Yesterday I walked in the Race against Racism. In the midst of the walk I turned to one of my partners and said, "*The real danger here is that all of us will think we have actually done something*

about racism in Lancaster by walking or running for three miles.” We are still known as one of the most racist cities in the United States, and yet there were 3,000 people out in force yesterday speaking of our deepest hopes that we might make a difference. Perhaps we need to begin with the churches of Lancaster City and let the powers that be scratch their collective heads as they see the way we work together and the way we treat each other. Let them say of us, “Amazing, isn’t it, how they are able to love one another.”

Conclusion and Invitation

Resurrection faith; for some of us it is “show me.” We cry out to God and tell God that we will only believe if we can see his hands and feet and place our hands in his side. We need to know that we worship a God who understands our human condition, and Jesus offers us his hands and his feet. He places our hands in his side.

For others of us Resurrection faith is “say so”: *Peace be with you.* We are called to bring the peace of God into the life of this city.

For all of us we are met at this table by our risen Lord who says: *You need proof? This is my body broken for you. You need peace? This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for the remission of sins so that you may have the peace with God you seek.*