

A sermon delivered by Abby Salak, seminary intern at the First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Sunday, April 15, 2012, the Second Sunday of Easter, dedicated to the love of my life, Melissa.

“Believing Without Seeing”

Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-31

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Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer.

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Dorothy Allison writes of the day she decided to live:

“After my childhood, after all that long terrible struggle to simply survive, to escape my stepfather, uncles, speeding Pontiacs, broken glass and rotten floorboards, or that inevitable death by misadventure that claimed so many of my cousins; after watching so many die around me, I had not imagined that I would ever need to make such a choice. I had imagined the hunger for life in me was insatiable, endless, unshakable.

“Just as I did not know that what I needed had to come up from inside me, not be laid over the top of my head. The bitterness with which I had been born, that had been nurtured inside me, could not be eased with a lover or a fight or any number of late-night meetings and clumsily written manifestoes.

“The decision to live when everything inside and out shouts death is not a matter of moments but of years, and no one has ever told me how you know when it is accomplished. All those stories were rising in my throat. Voices were echoing in my neck, laughter behind my ears, and I was terribly,

terribly afraid that I was finally as crazy as my kind was supposed to be.

“But the desire to live was desperate in my belly, and the stories I had hidden all those years were the blood and bone of it. It was most of all my deep abiding desire to live fleshed and strengthened on the page, a way to tell the truth as a kind of magic not cheapened or distorted by a need to please anybody at all. ”

In the Gospel of John this week, we find the disciples hiding behind locked doors. They are living in fear after the beating and crucifixion of Christ. Fear is a strong emotion, one that can be life giving – it motivates us to seek protection in times of danger; to motivate us toward change; to remind us that we are human, that we are fragile. At the same time, fear can immobilize us; isolate us; lock the doors.

The disciple’s reaction was a natural and immobilizing fear - they had seen what had happened to Jesus - the beatings, the torture, his death. They knew that as his followers, they could be next. And what does Christ do what he arrives at their door? He blesses them with peace and the Holy Spirit and sends them out into the world! No more hiding behind locked doors, no more fear – Jesus Christ is resurrected and a new life begins.

It’s just that simple, right? Nope. A week later and the disciples are still behind closed doors, this time with Thomas – who missed Christ’s first visit. Jesus arrives again and Thomas asks to touch the wounds to know the truth of the resurrection. Why are the disciples still hiding, after Jesus made his wishes known- that they should minister to the world?

As the Rev. Christine M. Smith writes, the disciples stayed hidden because the resurrection life is not always a joyful thing.

“Resurrection life,” she writes, “life that speaks our name and commissions us to speak its power to others, is rarely embraced by us with abandonment. Resurrection life, life that holds out wounded hands and pierced bodies and invites us to see and touch, is seldom what we would boldly choose.”

Despite knowing what is asked of us, bravely and unflinchingly embracing that life is hard and terrifying. In the midst of this new fear, a fear in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the disciples continued hiding. Christ sends the disciples out into the world as, he says, God sent him.

It was Thomas who asked for more. We typically refer to him as “doubting Thomas,” and never in a very positive way. The story we tell about Thomas implies that his asking to touch Christ’s body made him less of a believer. He did not believe without seeing. He longed for a closeness to his teacher; knowing that this was a life-changing moment and the closer he gets, the more his life will be impacted.

Jesus does not rebuke Thomas for his longing for more; he merely asks if he now believes after seeing. He tells Thomas and all of us - blessed are they who have not seen and yet come to believe. Rev. Smith asks the question I think we should all be asking on this Sunday after Christ’s resurrection: “What would change in our world if more of us were willing to put our fingers in the mark of the nails that crucify people daily and put our hands in broken and wounded sides?”

The message that Christ brought to the world is a message of the coming reign of God. This message may sound different to each of us, depending on who we are. Father Juan Luis Segundo, a liberation theologian, divides those hearing the message into three groups – the poor and oppressed, those in power and believers.

For the poor and oppressed, the reign of God is a joyful message. It is a message of a transformed, just world.

Although joyful, it is not easy to hear. It requires a change in outlook because the words are so incredible. The oppressed are no longer victims, but agents of their own hope.

For those in power, the oppressors, the promise of God's reign brings terror; an upset of the status quo upon which they rely. In order for this group to see the coming of the reign of God, the powerful must be willing to work side-by-side with those they oppress.

For those of us who are believers, followers of Christ's way, we hear the message of God's reign as a challenge to more faithful action. Jesus's words demand that we deepen our "social, political and ecclesiastical analysis" so that we "can better discern and resist the forces of injustice and evil" surrounding us. Christ's words here in the Gospel of John - commanding the disciples to enter the world, bestowing the Holy Spirit upon them, sharing his body and wounds so that they might all believe - this is the faith of the risen Christ, the faith of the resurrection.

According to Kenan Osborne, "resurrection faith is not fundamentally faith in an empty tomb. It is faith in the action of God." It is transformative, life-giving power. Resurrection is the hope and promise that God, with us working as well, can bring new life, a transformed world, and realized justice. Just as Dorothy Allison chose to live and lived out that decision through story-telling, so must we choose to have faith in the risen Christ without seeing. We choose this life of resurrected faith; we must choose to place our hands in the wounds of the world in order to believe that we can transform it.

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