

“Come, See, Believe”

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 2, April 16, 2023, dedicated to all who have led our BREAD efforts at First Church through the past 23 years, to all the organizers who have walked beside us in our efforts for justice action and always to the glory of God!

“Come, See, Believe”

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Let us pray: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen*

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Only one week removed from all five of our senses being blown-away by BELIEF with the sounds of two organs, timpani, brass and the choir, the touch and taste of the feast of resurrection joy – with which we had real bread and real grape juice in Holy Communion – (the first time in years), the smell of beautiful Easter flowers, the sight of the cross with white linen cloth upon it, and the continual spoken proclamations that “Christ is Risen, Indeed,” today, we come face to face with **doubt**.

In the Gospel of John’s very next scriptural verses following Mary Magdalene’s wonderful and joyful exclamation that she has discovered and encountered her Risen Teacher, her rabbi in the Garden, we meet

Thomas doubting that this is true. From fierce faith running from the empty tomb to empty faith fiercely declaring “this can’t be true.” With these two stories back-to-back – we move into this resurrection season we call Easter.

Because of this passage, Thomas, has been crowned “Doubting Thomas.” I propose that rather than call him “Doubting Thomas” we should all look in the mirror and say, “that guy reminds me of me.” Moreover, we should look at Thomas as an early scientist – the one who needs physical proof of the wild proclamations that the tomb is empty, that Jesus is Risen from the dead and that the Risen Savior has visited his disciples. Really?

It is the second week after Easter when Thomas finally sees Jesus face-to-face. He has been listening to his cohorts for these days before go on and on about their encounters with the Risen Jesus when he has not even seen him. Let’s cut this guy a break. Only when he finally places his hands in the holes in Jesus’ side and hands does he believes. He needed to see. Jesus lets him see and touch the holes in Jesus’ hands and the holes in Jesus’ side, he just needs to see. He needs to touch him. Then, the Risen Savior loves Thomas in that moment declaring – for all who will follow for all time – *“blessed are the ones who do not see and yet believe.”*

Come, See, Believe.

As we step into the 50 days of Easter, I have been thinking a lot about Thomas and what it means to show up, to see, to believe. I am very grateful for all of you, who have come back the week after Easter. You have come back to continue to experience the Resurrection experience. Like Thomas, many of us need to see something firsthand

to believe it, while others do not need to see to believe. It is still Easter, and you are still here.

Nine days from now we have the chance to join as a powerful group of people making change, to come, to see and to believe how justice works in the BREAD Nehemiah Action.

Some of us here, need no physical evidence and life experience as proof that guns kill people, that our environment is in crisis, that 50,000 people in Columbus need Municipal ID's, and that more than 54,000 households in Franklin County need affordable housing. Others of us need doubt these things – no matter what you tell us. We need pictures, personal testimonies, spread sheets, numerical evidence, we need the research on these things, and we need hard facts to believe these things. We ask lots of questions and make commentary about everything. We need to touch and see for ourselves. We who doubt tend to drive you who are true believers crazy. Similarly, we who are true believers about the truth (we perceive) about injustice drive you who are doubters crazy by our seeming blind faith. We hear something and deem it true.

The work of justice always brings together doubters and true believers. There is a place for each of kind of person in the work of BREAD – Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity. In nine days, we all get the chance to experience that unity in diversity. That is what will happen at the Nehemiah Action on April 25th. Problems in our community are identified and solutions are recommended.

Currently, we are working hard on solutions to six issues (you can jump in with any one of them!) – Juvenile Justice, Municipal IDs, Gun Violence (Stop Violence/Build Trust), Eldercare, Affordable Housing and Environmental Justice.

So let me introduce you to two problems and our solutions as the people of BREAD (of which includes every member and friend of First Church) as a community of faith – Jews and Christians – to these problems.

We have a problem with Affordable Housing. We know from research provided by The Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio that in Franklin County there are more than 54,000 low-income families spending $\frac{1}{2}$ or more of their paycheck on housing. This includes renters and homeowners. It also includes parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles who have stepped up, opened their houses and are raising their young relatives with little or no financial support.

We know that in 2021, a worker in Franklin County needed to earn \$19.83 per hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment (Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio). We know that in 2017, the Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio projected that meeting the housing needs of half of the 54,000 low-income families struggling to afford housing would cost \$835 million. That was six years ago. We know that is over \$1,000,000,000,000 now.

And we know that only 25% of families eligible for rental assistance receive it in Franklin County. The Columbus City Council's tax policy incentive change for affordable housing through tax incentives to developers does not impact the neediest families. (Move to Prosper). Finally, we know there were 18,441 eviction filings with Franklin County Municipal Court in 2015. This compares to about 12,000 in Cleveland and 22,000 in New York City (Affordable Housing Alliance of Central Ohio). Think about this, our largest American city had almost as many evictions as we had. That is awful.

Even with the Franklin County Courts limiting evictions last Spring and despite the federal moratorium, there were over 12,000 eviction filings in Franklin County from March 2020 – March 2021.

We have solutions in the face of the Affordable Housing crisis. We have pressed the Franklin County Commissioners to increase their affordable housing commitment. In 2019, they approved a resolution which would generate about \$6.5 million of additional funding to affordable housing. Columbus is sitting on half-billion dollars that was allocated through the American Rescue Plan in 2021 and it is just sitting there. We want to see one-third of the American Rescue Plan dollars go to the Affordable Housing Trust, targeting families at or below 50% of the Area Median Income (\$30,000 per year).

In the City of Columbus, we want to see 30% of the American Rescue Plan dollars go to housing solutions, targeting families at or below 50% of the Area Median Income. We want City Council to work with us on a housing plan that will require developers to set aside 20% of new housing for households making less than 50% of the Area Median Income (\$30,000 per year). All of this can be done. We know that, too. And we need all of us to come together to support these solutions with our power in numbers on Tuesday, April 25th.

We know there are problems with our environment – locally, nationally, and globally. We know we all must think globally and act locally. Locally, we know the most severe impacts of climate change are hitting our most vulnerable neighbors the hardest. Certain zip codes are more likely to suffer from the effects of flooding, poor air quality and increased heat.

Through our research we learned that:

Of 60 major US cities, Columbus is the fastest growing and 8th largest urban heat island. Columbus can expect an additional 3-7 weeks of 90+ degree days by 2050 (Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center).

Columbus is getting more and heavier rain, which increases the likelihood of flooding and poses significant risks to infrastructure and public health. The number of days per year that had more than 1.25 inches of rainfall increased by 75% from 1951 to 2012 (Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center).

Columbus is currently ranked as the 13th worst place in the country to live with asthma, and days over 90 degrees are associated with dangerous ozone pollution levels that can trigger asthma attacks, heart attacks, and other serious health issues (Columbus Urban Forestry Master Plan). All of this is evidence based.

Columbus has less tree coverage than cities of comparable size and development, and 70% of our existing tree canopy is on privately owned land. Communities like Franklinton (15%), Milo Grogan (16%) and South Side (18%) are well below the city average. Columbus currently lacks any protections for trees on private property, which means developers can cut down any and all trees without needing approval, and without needing to replant elsewhere.

Beyond the obvious dangers posed by flooding, health experts have told us that flooding can be a major contributor to **respiratory issues** since mold and dust mites thrive in moist environments. These dangers are compounded by a lack of regulation on mold in homes as well as the high cost of remediation. If you are lower income, you are

more likely to live close to highways, industry, and other areas with higher pollution, more pavement, and less tree coverage because they are the most affordable, all of which can trigger respiratory problems.

We have solutions. We can protect our trees. That is it. The key is to protect our large, mature trees!

Urban forests are one of the most valuable forms of infrastructure a city can have! That is because trees absorb stormwater, filter pollutants from industries and highways, and reduce heat through shade and evaporation. Protecting our large, mature trees is critical because they can reduce summertime ambient air temperature by 20 degrees F, reduce street level air pollution by 60%, and absorb hundreds of millions of gallons of stormwater (Columbus Urban Forestry Master Plan).

The cooling effect of one healthy tree is equivalent to 10 room-sized air conditioners operating 20 hours a day (North Carolina State University 2012). The shade of properly placed trees can save homeowners up to 58% on daytime air conditioning costs, while mobile homeowners can save up to 65% (Smith 1999).

New York City saw a significant decrease of asthma in young children (-29%) after increasing its tree canopy through the installation of over 300 trees for each square kilometer (Lovasi et al. 2008).

If you are curious what the tree canopy coverage is like in your neighborhood? Find out using the Columbus Urban Forestry Master Plan's map.

At the 2022 Nehemiah Action, we asked city officials the following key questions: Will you commit to ensuring that the (Urban Forestry Master) plan is implemented with fidelity? Will you commit

to ensuring that the public tree ordinance is introduced to City Council no later than February 1, 2023? Will you commit to having a consultant under contract to develop a private tree protection ordinance no later than June 1, 2023? Will you commit to convening quarterly meetings between BREAD, yourself, and appropriate staff so that we can discuss details of the ordinance and share our input? Their responses were all “Yes.” We continue to work with them to guarantee the implementation of the public tree ordinance and the private tree protection ordinance.

We still have a lot to do with this make sure our solutions work. BREAD cannot work if we do not show up in large numbers to make it all happen. Our power is not in money but in people power. I invite you; I implore you to come on Tuesday night April 25th for BREAD. Together with thousands of other Central Ohio faithful people – Jewish and Christian, Black, White, Brown and more, young and old, rich and poor – we are BREAD. It is you and me. Moreover, it is all of us together working for solutions to injustice in our community.

Just as Lent – was for us – a season of giving up something, letting go and letting God into our lives, let us all approach this Easter season with sense of spirituality, urgency, and action. Lent was a time to see the problems in our lives and work to personally address them through the power of forgiveness. Easter is a time step into the urgency of problems in our society and address them with solutions.

I find it interesting how many folks have opinions about BREAD. BREAD is THE most effective citizen action group in Central Ohio. Yet some doubt BREAD and judge BREAD. Justice is hard work. It is difficult to change the stream of movement for injustice. BREAD is

the best way to do this. Whether you are a doubter or a true believer, let's all get behind BREAD and all show up – because BREAD is each and everyone of us.

Come, see, and believe. Come to the BREAD Nehemiah Action April 25. There is topflight care child and programming for children as well as a fast-paced action agenda. April 25th at 6:30pm at the Celeste Center on the Ohio State Fairgrounds, 717 East 17th Avenue. We start on time, and we end by 8:30pm. We also have hats and First Church has t-shirts for all of us who want to wear a t-shirt. It is all in-person this year for the first time since 2019.

Come, see, believe. You will be part of the largest Faith-Justice Action in Ohio in 2023. Don't miss it. Thanks be to God for solutions to our community problems. Bread rises. Amen.

