

**“Blessed  
are those who  
have not seen  
and yet have  
come to  
BELIEVE.”**

**John 20:29, NRSV**

**APRIL 19, 2020**

## **Introduction and Welcome**

### **Call to Worship**

I know that my redeemer liveth

And that he shall stand

At the latter day, upon the earth (from Handel's "Messiah")P

**Reading the Word:** John 20:19-31

**Message:** "Doubt"

Rev. Deb Hanson

### **Prayer:**

Gracious God, like so many people, we have doubted and questioned. So often we want proof of what we read in the Bible or the things we hear in church. Remind us that faith is a journey, one that is filled with ups and downs. Remind us that we can wonder because it helps us to keep growing as we wrestle with what we believe. Most of all, remind us that you are still with us on this path of life, and we are never alone. We are thankful that your steadfast love holds us up even when we feel unsure. Most of all, we are thankful for the fact that Jesus lives, and through his life, death, and resurrection, we have life eternal. Amen.

**The Lord's Prayer** (unison)

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

**Hymn:** "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"

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**Blessing**



SERMON TRANSCRIPT GIVEN BY  
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“Doubt” 4/19/2020  
First UMC Rev. Dr. Debra J. Hanson

SCRIPTURE: John 20:19-31 (reading verses 26-31)

You know, I really can't blame the disciple Thomas for questioning the other disciples when they told him they had seen Jesus, raised from the dead. How many of us would have said, "Yah, right!" and shook our heads in disbelief. So I think Thomas got bad rap! In fact, the other disciples had already questioned Mary Magdalene's report that Jesus was alive, and she had seen him, so let's not blame Thomas for wondering!

Thomas wasn't there when Jesus, immune to locked doors, appeared among them. He wasn't a ghost that they could see through, but the real thing. His greeting was one of peace, the peace that they could have when it finally sank in that he was really there. So, Mary Magdalene was right - Jesus WAS alive. With joy, they greeted him - all except for Thomas, who was missing at the time. When Thomas heard about it, he wouldn't believe them, and none of them had believed it at first. They all wanted proof. They all wanted to see Jesus in person, and they all had their chance.

What is the first thing Jesus does after he enters the room - each time he visits? He greets them with peace. He suddenly appears where they are locked inside the Upper Room, gathered together to draw comfort and strength or encouragement from each other. In essence, they were the first church congregation, and that is how we model our Sunday worship: gathering together to draw comfort and strength or encouragement from each other. Of course, our primary purpose in worship on Sunday mornings is to worship, to lift our praises to God, to build each other up, and to encourage each other. We do that in the context of the community of faith. Of course, this year, we are worshipping virtually, at least for a while.

Jesus did and said some very specific things to this first congregation. He greeted them with peace; he commissioned and sent them forth to carry on his work; he breathed the power of the Holy Spirit on them; and he taught them about forgiveness. Peace, mission, evangelism, empowerment, and forgiveness are models for the church. We are called to witness and make disciples for Christ, and sometimes that is a challenge! In today's scripture, Thomas wasn't there for the first visit, and he didn't believe them when they said they had seen Jesus. How many people in our congregations feel that way?

In one of the churches I served, there were a number of folks who would come into my office to talk with me about where they were in their journeys; these were seekers who weren't sure about all this faith in Jesus "stuff". Many struggled to believe. Many were there trying to find a way to believe. One woman told me that she came every Sunday because she wanted to know Jesus or at least to figure out why all the other folks believed in him. They were a witness to him, and she was drawn to be among the people who believed. Thomas didn't believe until he encountered Jesus face to face, but he didn't abandon his congregation.

Most of us go through times of doubt, and I think this passage tells us that doubt isn't bad. Notice that Thomas isn't thrown out because he wanted proof, but he continued to be part of the group and was sent forth to carry on the work of Jesus along with the others. Thomas wasn't locked out of the room, but was welcomed in. In what ways do we, as a church, attempt to lock people out? In what ways do we lock ourselves in?

When we try to keep out people who are different from us, we are locking people out, and at the same time, we lock ourselves into a pattern that could eventually keep us stuck and without growth. We can feel locked out when we wonder how to help change poverty, homelessness, hunger, abuse, and discrimination and feel helpless in trying to do anything about it. Being locked out can happen when we feel guilty about things in our lives or have bad self-esteem (or the opposite - think too highly of ourselves). We feel locked out when our children do things that we know are destructive to themselves or others or see someone who struggles with addictions or depression. There is a sense of helplessness when we can't find ways to help.

Being locked in happens when we are blocked by fear, anxiety, anger, and resentment. These things can eat at us and cause us to behave in ways that hurt others or ourselves. A few years ago, I heard of two churches who were newly yoked. They shared a pastor, and they were having all kinds of problems. Neither church wanted to give an inch to the other church, and at one joint meeting, people began shouting and hollering at each other over the ways things were happening. These issues were not about God, but about people being locked into a set pattern of doing things and wanting everything to stay the same even though that's impossible because they were in a new situation.

Whether locked in or locked out, we lose. If we do things that undermine the work of Jesus because we think something should be done OUR way or because we are stuck on some agenda of our own, we are locked behind or standing in front of locked doors. But, do you know what? Jesus isn't bothered by locked doors. Even when we misbehave or doubt, Jesus passes through the locked doors and stands in our midst. Even when the church struggles with poor communication, judgmental attitudes toward each other and others, even when we might not help out where help is needed or behave in ways that hurt others, Jesus is in our midst. He's here right now. Today. Right here with us even though we are worshiping physically apart from one another.

Maybe this gives us time to think about what it means to be the Church. Maybe this is when we can hold onto the feelings of support we are experiencing through our daily videos and devotionals. I'm hearing of people who are calling others to check on them and to just say "hi," and I know from talking by phone or on line with people in the congregation, we are trying to do whatever we can in order to stay healthy and safe. So, even though it may seem like we are "locked in" to our homes or "locked out" of public places, we don't have to feel that way about our relationship with Christ or each other. Jesus passes through those locks and asks us to live our faith wherever we are. Maybe this time in our lives is a good time to take spiritual inventory and to find ways to let go of things, to forgive others and even ourselves.

One of the directives he gave the disciples was to forgive. Forgiveness is needed in several ways. We need to ask for forgiveness for our own faults and sinful behaviors. Sometimes we don't even realize we have behaved in harmful ways, and it's good to take an assessment of what we might have said or done that could be harmful to someone else. Jesus stood in front of the disciples and showed them the scars he bore. As a Church of human beings who are NOT perfect (as in being flawless), we all bear the scars of life and we all stand in need of forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive someone else, that lack of forgiveness stays with us.

Forgiveness is always offered and available to us - no matter what, but we need to be willing to let go of what digs into us and what things we hold against another person and maybe even God in order to really be forgiven. Verse 23 says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." This doesn't give the disciples or us any great power to forgive others in God's place; rather, it gives us the power to forgive so that we can move on, move forward in our lives. Forgiveness means letting go of resentment, anger, fear, and the sense of injustice, and leave the judging to God. When we forgive someone else (maybe sometimes it's a little piece at a time), we begin to trust God to take care of the other person or persons and let go of it. One of the popular sayings in Alcoholics Anonymous is "Let Go and Let God." It works the same way with forgiveness. WE are not the judges of others - only God can do that.

It's always good to stop and think about our behaviors and how they might reflect God to others. If something we are doing is harmful, we may want to stop doing it. If what we choose to do and say builds up the other person or persons, that is most likely pleasing to God. Forgiveness is the starting point whether it's to forgive someone else or forgive ourselves. When we forgive others and ourselves, we open doors - the doors of our hearts and minds so that we can continue to grow. Doubt is part of growth, too. I remember reading somewhere years ago that when we doubt, we just keep on trying, work through it, and trust that God is with us to help us go through growing in our faith and ability to trust in God.

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are called to witness to our faith through the way we live our lives. The problem is that so many who don't believe see our imperfections and say that the church is full of hypocrites. There is another old saying I've shared with you before: "The church isn't a haven for saints, but a hospital for sinners." This is where Jesus stands in our midst. This is where we practice forgiveness, healing, acceptance, and moving forward. This is where we witness to each other in our faith journeys and support each other in difficult times. This is where we are trained to go live in an often-hostile world that doesn't want to hear our witness.

During these uncertain days of COVID-19 that has affected our world, it would be easy to doubt, easy to blame, easy to complain. But, maybe this is a time for growth. Maybe this is a time to renew our covenant with Jesus; maybe this is a time for connecting with others by phone, email, ZOOM, FaceTime, or social media to support and encourage because the love of Christ will infuse our lives and help us to understand more fully the love God has for each one of us and for our world.

As we journey through these challenging times, let us remember that we are not alone. The risen Christ is with us, we have each other, and we have been given the gift of people who are guiding us through the medical concerns that COVID-19 brings. Be safe, be careful, wash your hands often, take precautions, and reach out if you need to talk with someone. May God fill you with hope, joy, peace, and love. Amen.