

## **COME AND BELIEVE**

John 20:19-31

As the youth group discussed the possibility of marriage, one young man insisted that he would work to have everything in place before he headed for the altar---education, career, and financial independence. Only when he was ready, would he consent to marry. As one might expect, discussion about children followed. Most agreed that they would want to have children, though not at that moment. But then there was Cathy. She suggested that she would marry if she found just the right person and among the standards she set was that he would not want to have children.

Cathy was fun-loving and gregarious. She was also quite certain about how her life would unfold, whether he came along or not. She preferred order and knew that children were messy. She like her independence and saw a child as counter to such freedom. She wanted nice things in live and could not countenance those who might destroy them. When her brother had a child, she felt herself relieved of the pressure of providing grandchildren. Cathy liked control. When she did meet Mr. Right, she contacted the pastor of her church and outlined for him exactly how the wedding would unfold. The pastor listened and only objected when Cathy stated her preference in music---tunes from current Broadway musicals. Her pastor had more in mind a tune from Bach or perhaps Mozart but Andrew Lloyd Webber was not among the choices possible. Cathy got married in the park, strutting down the aisle to one of familiar show tunes from the theater.

All went well. She developed a career in event planning and was greatly successful. He husband deferred to her when necessary, which was mostly often. He life was humming along as she had expected, as she had planned. Then William came along in spite of her vow to be without children. Many wondered how she would possibly thrive as a mother for it seemed that she had no maternal instinct whatsoever. Perhaps husband would supply what might be needed.

She surprised everyone by immediately taking up the role of mother and seemingly enjoying it. Quickly she declared that she could not imagine life without William and she become helicopter mom extraordinaire. Cathy attributed her dramatic change to the simply experience of holding her child in her arms and discovering immediate affection for and protection of William.

Those who did not come to the tomb as the women and two of the disciples did found it difficult to embrace resurrection. John relates the experience of Thomas who was absent not only from the tomb but also from the appearance of the Risen Christ. His response to the news was met with doubt, which became the way by which Thomas has become known. In the face of the joy of the disciples who had come to believe, Thomas declares that he must see the marks of the nails and be able to touch both the wounded hands and injured side, he will remain doubting.

And yet, when a week later the Risen Christ stood among them, Thomas responds unexpectedly. When invited to touch, Thomas quickly responds with words that express Thomas' believing: "My Lord and My God!" .

Following the interaction between Thomas and Risen Christ, the Gospel of John declares that there were many other experiences---he calls them signs---that are not included in his gospel but that all of the accounts that compose his writing are intended to bring forth believing that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God.

In our modern world, believing is most often a product of our senses. We believe what we see or hear, what we taste and smell and touch. Add a dose of logic and season with past events and we claim to apprehend the truth which most would admit to be the source of believing.

In the time of Jesus, however, believing is more comprehensive, intended to include trust and assurance, foster conviction and conscience, and bring forth promise and doctrine. Little wonder, then, that Thomas was initially unwilling to accept the report of the disciples. Believing would become the foundation for the continuing response of Thomas to the experience of the Risen Christ. Tradition proclaims that this disciple offered the good news to people well beyond the borders of Israel even into the land of India where small communities of Mar Thomas continue to survive and even thrive in the midst of the predominantly Hindu religious environment.

As the church is the Body of Christ, it is called to prepare those who come to it for the experience of the Risen Christ. During this season of Easter as the "alleluias" of faith continue to be both spoken and heard, we read from the Acts of the Apostles as the disciples struggled to portray good news in a generally hostile environment. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter and John and often others witnessed to the word and activity of Jesus even though, as is the case in this record, they were met with resistance, an opposition that frequently caused them to be thrown into prison. The testimony at this point is that they are released from confinement in order

that the men continue to preach and teach, much to the frustration and awe of the religious authorities who fear reprisal from the Roman empire which will not allow such challenges to its power. Reaction to the audacity of the disciples enrages the leaders to the point that they seek to kill the disciples, just as they had wished to do away with their Christ. One among who was greatly respected calmed their fury with the strong suggestion that the leaders simply wait to note the response of the people to these apostles for if their teaching was not of God it would surely fail as had the efforts of several others in their time. If it was of God, these leaders would discover themselves fighting against God, an awkward if not threatening position for such authorities to take up.

In similar manner, the worshipping church hears during this season from the Revelation to John, traditionally the same John who wrote gospel. This revelation is filled with further signs of the confrontation between evil, particularly the violent distress brought forth by Rome, and the assuring promise that is provided to the followers of the Risen Christ by God who would emerge victorious from the battle between darkness and light. Hope is offered to all who would find themselves threatened by the powers of the world then and now.

As Easter people, it is the responsibility of the church, the Body of Christ, to open people to the experience of the Risen Christ with every hope and expectation that responses to these experiences will lead to believing, to trusting, to acting in the manner of Jesus who offers the example of one who aligns himself with the will of God. Therefore, the church gathers to be a community of worship and prayer, of study and conversation, of response and action, not only to build up its own but to engage others who come seeking God. Just as Peter and John and even Thomas did, we move from being those who hear the Word to a community that bears the Word into the world, utilizing all that is provided to us through the presence and work of the Spirit.

Such activity frequently causes turmoil, even as it did within the early community of believers. Jesus' blessing repeated within the account featuring Thomas is that of peace being present among those who struggled to fully understand of that had occurred. Such peace is promise rather than pretense, an experience that will lead those who hear it, any who take it up beyond the time of discussion and disagreement and even division to a further conviction of what it means to be followers of Christ.

As United Methodists, we are in the midst of such a period in our history. Once again, the church seems threatened with fracture, with groups coalescing around particular and often oppositional points of view regarding the issue of including. Some would seek to hold fast to tradition while others wish

to express new understandings of how the community of Christ can be. Perhaps as we look back at the time of the early church as it is recounted in the Book of Acts and even as it is celebrated in the Revelation to John, we can take courage that there can be more than one expression of church even as there were followers of Peter who centered himself in Jerusalem and Paul who took the gospel to the various cities of the empire. It may be that as new images of church emerge, the good news is offered in ways that provide experiences of the persistence of Peter and the creativity of Paul. We need not fear the time ahead, rather let us be faithful to the call to be the church, however it might be offered to the world.

Gilead Church centers its worship life on stories that translate the gospel into stories that are shared among many. The church is a jarring experience for those who are more comfortable with stained glass windows, pews, hymn books, and organ music. Held in a bar, Gilead Church seeks to discover alignment between the stories of individuals with those of gospel all the while retaining many of the aspects of Christian worship that have sustained and fed God-seeking people over the ages. At the end of each story, words familiar to us are spoken as a possible response of the community: “The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.” The central idea of Gilead’s story telling is that God’s promises are incarnated in the events of everyday life, that, in the words of the leaders, “every story is a God story” Listening and speaking continue to be the rhythm of religious life, especially at Gilead where those who have left the church meet those who have never been part of a church find connection to each other and to God.

It is in the story telling that gospel comes alive to the people at Gilead Church. Referring to the Thomas story, or rather the account of the Risen Christ who pronounces blessing “to those who have not seen yet believe”, the pastor recounted the experience of comforting his three-year old who had awakened from a bad dream. His presence in the darkened bedroom announced a sense of safety for the child who could return to her sleep confident that she would not be alone. The pastor admits that he will not always be able to prevent her from being hurt in the world but that the story “carries a deeper truth” that is that “Faith is choosing a story and choosing to live by that story even in the face of counterinformation.”

As it is with Thomas, so it is with us. Easter people have story to tell about grace that brings about resurrection, especially in the face of what appears to be the threat of great disaster. It is a story of peace in the midst of turmoil, of light dawning in the face of persistent darkness, of new life growing out of death. It is a story for the church, it is the story of the church. Thanks be to God. Amen.