

“Faith Abides But Doubt Enlivens”

John 20: 19-31

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One of the joys of ministry is keeping one’s mouth shut and one’s ears open! That may seem self evident but a professional danger of ministry is the open mouth syndrome in which one comes to believe that ordination has not only bestowed privileges but also a right to comment on all things whether bright or beautiful! However I did accomplish this feat the other day and listened to the wisdom of a member who offered the thought that Covenant isn’t growing because covenant members aren’t sharing with others why they participate at Covenant and they don’t share that because they aren’t sure themselves!!

Now I spent quite a bit of time thinking about that and what it might mean to this congregation and this denomination. It seems to me that if I had to answer the question of why am I a Presbyterian and why do I participate in the life of Covenant, while my answer is skewed by the twice monthly paychecks, I might say I am here because it is a community of open minded, accepting, and thoughtful people seeking to discover what it means to be Christians in Madison in 2011.

Perhaps that answer isn’t an answer you or anyone here would have given which is fine but when we consider how congregations grow and what evangelism is, we might want to spend a few minutes considering that evaluating our commitment can only be a good thing. And remember we are Presbyterians which means that each of us is responsible for that answer. And think about that as we look at the passage we read from John and what it says and means for us.

John’s Gospel offers its traditional or oldest ending as this story of the disciples in the upper room being visited by the resurrected Jesus. And there is not one visit but two. Tradition also tells us that it is this story from which we draw the idea of Thomas as the doubter or doubting Thomas. Yet if we read this story carefully and honestly what we will find is that the disciples other than Thomas don’t exactly leap forward with faith upon Jesus initial appearance. Read the passage and you will discover that it is only after they see the wounds which Thomas wants to touch that they confess in Jesus as Christ. Thomas simply wanted more physical proof of touching the wounds but the other disciples needed to see them. And it is Thomas who offers the first confession of Jesus as Lord. Remember the other disciples don’t confess, they simply rejoice. And I hope you heard the latter part of the pericope in which Jesus speaks of those who don’t see and yet believe. A quick reminder – it is not those who have not touched but those who have not seen – an obvious reference to the actions of the disciples who now have all seen and believe.

A word about the possible reason this story appears in John. And by the way, it appears in no other Gospel. There may have been two reasons for this story. The first being the need for the early church that the writer of John knew, to have a solid foundation for its

evangelism or church growth efforts. Remember it was now becoming a time in the history of the early church when several things had happened and one thing had not. The thing which had not happened was the return of Jesus as Savior of the world who would bring history to an end. And the things which had happened were that those who had known the earthly Jesus were dying off and the people taking over were in part some who had not even know the ones who had known the earthly Jesus. And of course, for the faith filled in this community to whom John's Gospel was intended, they found themselves forced out of their community because they dared to believe in Jesus as Christ. These things created a need for a faith statement that would be the foundation for believing without seeing, for understanding that their faith was relational or relative to them, for understanding that the second coming of Jesus was not necessary for sins to be forgiven and in fact that the purpose of the "signs" or miracle stories was to inform people who Jesus was and is and not that they should look forward to a future judgment or in breaking of God. John's Gospel may be summarized in these 12 verses as John ends his gospel.

Moving further into the story, consider what we have here is two stories which are very, very similar. In the first, it is the disciples less Thomas who are in a locked room and Jesus appears among them with the traditional greeting of "peace be with you". The second story begins again in almost the exact same manner except Thomas is now with them and the doors are simply shut and perhaps not locked. Consider that like the story of Zechariah and the entrance of the messiah into Jerusalem on a mule and the foal of an ass, maybe we have a construction which simply seeks to emphasize that the disciples have seen and one actually touched the wounds of the risen Jesus. I want to theorize that this part of the story would explain why this appearance was not known by others or even accidentally discovered by them. No one else could have known or participated for the doors were shut, they were locked. And the disciples saw the wounds; in fact one of them even touched such.

It was important to the early church that a theology or theory of how and why people could be converted be developed. Remember this was a movement which had in its early years a hierarchy of believers based upon those who knew Jesus as a human figure, those who knew those who knew Jesus, and on and on in concentric circles of faith. This story may have been an attempt to assure all that one could be a believer without knowing anyone who knew anyone who knew anyone who knew Jesus. The passage reads that blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe and maybe this is a reference to the Johanine foundational understanding that it is the word, not the physical presence which is important. One is as blessed who believes because they have simply heard, that is not seen, because how else would they come to believe if not through the hearing of Jesus. John is here emphasizing as at that beginning that it is the word, the message conveyed by the telling of the stories which conveys the truth, hope, and peace of God's presence. One who believes because of that word, as a result of hearing those stories is as blessed, as faith filled as one who traveled with and witnessed to the miracles, the signs which the earthly Jesus performed.

And the last reason for this story may have been to relieve those who were looking for the imminent return of Jesus to begin the reign of God on earth that such return is not necessary nor perhaps even to be expected. Read the passage and see there that the receivers of the Holy Spirit are those who are able to forgive sins, end the suffering of those living without the presence of God or outside the community of believers because of their actions. The reign of God is to be known by a gathering together of the people of the world into the communal celebration marked by the signs of the earthly Jesus and the justice, hope, love, and peace those signs have promised. But the return is, while hoped for, unnecessary to await before the community is built. Those who have received the spirit, that is those who believe, can forgive sins and welcome all into the community.

OK, so what does that mean for Madison and Covenant in 2011? First and I think most importantly, the church grows and is known when the word is shared. Think about last week. Who were all those people? Well, I will tell you that they were people who were here because someone invited them to join us in worship. We can complain all we want about Christmas and Easter Presbyterians but the reality is that they were here because someone told them it was important that they join with us in worship. Oh sure, they'll come back if the music is good, and the preaching interesting, and the folks they meet are friendly but they come originally because someone invited them. And to listen to John's gospel message blessed are they who have not seen but come to believe and we are the ones who must enable them to believe by answering the question before it's asked – "why do I attend Covenant?"

And our answers should emphasize that our faith is in a God who is relative, relevant to us and to our lives. These Gospel stories are not about a God who is seeking people to believe because God offers some reward in some other reality, place in history, or foreign place. All the stories are about activities relevant to the participants' lives! Water to wine, resuscitation of a brother, feeding thousands – those are stories which seek to relate how relevant God's presence is. Our faith is alive and evolving and relevant because God is with us and is alive and evolving with us! Tell the story and grow the church.