

## Wesley United Methodist Church

4/12/15

"Peace Be With You."

John 20:19-31

Reverend Rick Lemburg, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Casa Grande, AZ describes himself as a "Presbyterian by earthquake." He explains that his grandmother, a Baptist, moved her family from Iowa to California many years ago. A Presbyterian pastor visited her and invited her to come to the Presbyterian church.

"I'm a Baptist," his grandmother said, "and it will take an act of God to get me to change." While they were chatting, an earthquake shook the home. Being from Iowa, she wasn't sure what it was, but when it was over, she said to the pastor, "I'll join."

I wish faith were that easy, don't you? I wish God would give each of us some unmistakable sign, perhaps not an earthquake, but some less frightening indication of His interest in our affairs. Nothing too dramatic. Well... that is not exactly true, is it? Actually, it would have to be awfully dramatic. We are pretty good at explaining away even the most wonder of miracles. Faith is not easy. God never meant for it to be. It is part of the struggle we go through in order to fit our souls for heaven.

What a couple of weeks it had been for the disciples. Everything happened so fast, too fast. One moment the crowds were welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem. A couple of days later he was arrested. The next day he died on a cross. The disciples were so shell-shocked they didn't know what to do next. They were afraid and kept a low profile. They were living in fear because they thought what happened to Jesus might very well happen to them. And then early that Sunday morning one of the women found the stone rolled away from the tomb. He is alive! Peter and one of the other disciples went racing to the tomb. Jesus' body was not there. Even more dramatic, Mary reported that she had seen and spoken to the risen Christ. That evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors not knowing what would happen next. In the midst of their confusion Jesus came and stood among them. He said to his disciples, "Peace be with you."

At first they were afraid. But when he showed them his hands and his side they rejoiced. Jesus was alive! Mary had told them the truth. They could see him with their own eyes. This was the most wonderful news imaginable. Then Jesus gave them a commission, "As the Father has sent me so I send you." The disciples were now apostles. No longer were they just learners, now they were messengers, responsible for carrying the message of salvation to the far corners of the world. The apostles were to continue the ministry of Jesus, they were to become his voice, his hands, his legs. Then Jesus breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is significant. John, the author, wanted his readers to know that Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples in the same way God breathed life into Adam, the first human.

For some unknown reason, however, one of the apostles, Thomas, was missing that first Easter evening. Thomas had not seen the risen Lord like the others had. The apostles told Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." Thomas was not convinced. It wasn't that he thought his friends were lying; their story was simply too good to be true. Thomas wanted proof. He wanted to see Jesus for himself. Thomas said, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Thomas was a realist. He had been hurt and disappointed. He had expected so much from Jesus. Then to watch him die on the cross like a common thief was too much for Thomas to bear. He had his hopes dashed once. Now he wanted to be careful because he didn't want to set himself up for another letdown. We have to admire Thomas for being so honest with his doubts. He just could not believe without seeing Jesus for himself. There is a little of Thomas in all of us.

Sometimes our periods of doubts and questions lead us to faith. Thomas struggled with his doubts for a week and he still met with the other disciples. He was not excluded from the group because he didn't believe them.

That says something about being the church. We don't exclude people just because they are searching. Such searching may be a springboard for an even greater faith. It certainly was for Thomas. A week later Jesus once again appeared to the apostles and this time Thomas was with them. Jesus knew that. And he knew

that Thomas doubted so he went to him and said, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side." "Do not doubt but believe." And Thomas made one of the greatest confessions recorded in the Bible. "My Lord and my God!" From that day forward Thomas would go forth risking his very life for the Lord.

Jesus told the apostles, however, that there is a better way of coming to faith. It is hearing and believing. He is saying to them that from now on faith would not be transmitted by earthquakes or by personal visits by the resurrected Christ. Faith would come by one person sharing with another what the Gospel has meant in his or her life. "Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have come to faith," Jesus said. From that moment on people would depend on the witness of the previous generation and the personal testimony of those whose lives have been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' words were spoken not only for them but also for us. We are invited to hear the Gospel message and believe.

From now on, Jesus said, people will respond and believe not because they have seen but because they have heard the message of salvation. Doubt is part of living. Faith is a struggle. But it is available, available to all who will hear and believe. "Peace be with you!"