

There is a sense in which Christian Faith comes to us as a very pretty wrapped Easter basket, that has been thoroughly worked over and resolved repeatedly, in every Culture, Nationality and Circumstance throughout 2000 years, so that all we need do is accept. BUT like Thomas, to believe, we each still need to process and decide to believe. This morning is time for us to Process what we Believe.

This morning instead of offering one nice neat sermon with 3 points; there are at least three sermons blowing upon my spirit. I recognize that many of us continue in the glow of EASTER, after LONG DARK WINTER months of isolation to burst forth in Spring. Others are consumed with this year's PATIO SALE, the Tents are set up, the Storage units are like Barns at Harvest; Volunteers pray for the Sermon to End so they can get back to their Service. While for others, there is a struggle, prompted by Reports of the Trial of the man whose superiors accuse of using excessive force, describing this as a Public Lynching.

SO to begin PROCESSING: One of our Leaders said to me last week; "Pastor, if you teach a Class on the development of Presbyterian Thought, I would come. How we got from Jesus to Peter & Paul, to Augustine, Anselm, Tertullian, to Luther, Calvin, to Karl Barth and Contemporary Theologians, I would be interested." Which will take some research and writing, but I really look forward to offering! Implicit in this request is that Christians do not all believe exactly the same thing. How many of us this morning were Cradle Presbyterian? How many grew up Catholic? Lutheran? Episcopal? Baptist? Congregational? Pentecostal? Disciples of Christ? But actually, not all Presbyterians believe the same.

Among the tools for us in planning Worship, are what are called COMMON LECTONARIES, which are a selection of Bible Readings: One Old Testament, One Psalm, One from the Gospels, one from the Epistles. What is hoped is that all Christian Churches whether Catholic or Protestant, would address the same Scripture passages at the same time. In this Age of COVID when people are watching multiple churches each Sunday, that you might actually talk with your neighbors and relatives, where the conversation could include "This is what Pastor Craig said in the sermon." "But Pastor Martin said this." "Pastor Bruce at E Free Church said this." And "My home Church said this." Because rather than being threatened by our neighbors, we actually pray for one another and care about each other. BUT even more, in this day and age we know people are going to form a patchwork quilt of beliefs. One difficulty is the temptation of trying to discern why the Committee at the Vatican selected these passages to go together; rather than trying to understand what the Gospel itself is saying and how we might apply this.

For the 2nd Sunday of Easter in the 2nd Year of the 3 year Cycle of the Lectionary, they selected for us this passage from the Book of Acts, and the continuation of John's Gospel concerning what happened ON Easter Day. When I first began discussion with our Church, there was this Mythic Epoch called PATIO SALE that most stated had to be experienced to be understood! Many said, "This is a vital MONEY MAKER, without which we could not fund our Missions." While others whispered, "How many more years can we continue doing this, as we are all getting older." Then we read this passage from The ACTS of The APOSTLES, and are challenged that what we are doing has nothing to do with MONEY MAKING! The First Identity of The EARLY CHURCH, in the first year after Jesus Death and Resurrection, was collecting all their belongings to share with one another, laying this at the Apostles' Feet, and distributing to others as any had need! There was not a needy person among them. For 40 of the 43 YEAR HISTORY of OUR CHURCH, this has been the Mission of OUR PATIO SALE VOLUNTEERS. Thank you

TURNING TO The GOSPEL: Perhaps it is because, while as a Preacher's Kid my family always went to worship, I came to know and believe in Jesus Christ in Discussion Groups, that this story is so meaningful. Last Sunday was Spectacular FUN, with Trumpet and Brass, triumphal music and crowds, actual crowds we have not had together in a long time; but different from the Sanctuary, is the locked away private

Living Room of the Upper Room. Because it is in Living Room conversations that we struggle with the meaning and application of realities to our lives. What am I gonna do without the person I have loved for 50 years? Who am I now that I cannot do what I always did? Cancer, on top of COVID, I have CANCER?

The first Question we have to ask ourselves here is: If the Resurrection of Jesus Easter morning comes as resolution of ALL that had taken place, response to the Crucifixion, to the Last Supper, entrance of the Messiah into Jerusalem, final response to the Incarnation of the baby at Christmas, reconciliation of the balance of Good and Evil from the Garden of Eden; IF MARY witnessed to the Disciples as Jesus had said; THEN WHY did Jesus appear to the Disciples in the Upper Room that evening?

On Easter we proclaimed that Nothing, Not even DEATH can separate us from God's Love! But in the Upper Room we wrestle with "Is God still the All Powerful God if he died? What do I believe is possible?"

I believe that among the reasons for the Upper Room is that The disciples needed to talk together to process information. John and Simon Peter said the Tomb was Empty...what does that mean? The Grave Clothes were left behind, so did Jesus no longer need them/ did he no longer have a body? How could they see him repeatedly and NOT recognize him? What happened and what does Easter mean?

The crucifixion was a demonstration of dominant power by an aggressor, designed to shut down all conversation and protest, DEATH left nothing to argue about, nothing to question. For the Jewish Authorities, the Sanhedrin, the Religious leaders, Crucifixion was a public lynching, who then left the body of the dead on display for all the world to witness and know this had been done, to reinforce their power. For the Roman Authorities, Crucifixion was a public Execution, emphasizing they had absolute power over life and death. But for us, what do we believe? Is it enough to believe that after a suffering death, Jesus' body is simply gone, the tomb empty? This story of the Upper Room identifies that in upsetting circumstances we cannot simply look away, we have an autopsy-like need to touch every wound and scar. An autopsy will never change the outcome, will never help us to answer the pain that this person we loved is taken from us, but touching the wounds confirms for us the depth of destruction, that nothing could be done... which then permits something very different. The story of the Upper Room does NOT tell us anything about Thomas. In truth Thomas does not doubt, anymore than all the other disciples doubted; and every one of them also abandoned and denied Jesus. NO what the Upper Room tells us is about who Jesus is, what kind of God we have.

This is not the story of Thomas seeking out Jesus to demand answers to his doubts! This is the story of Jesus being unphased by closed locked doors, hiding from the world because of our fears, Jesus just walks right through all our barriers. Jesus is so determined to confront this stalwart skeptic, whom none of the family of disciples can reach, that Jesus will not allow this sheep to be lost. It is Jesus who refuses to permit dead bolts, barriers or doubts to block the movement of love toward the one who struggles and is in pain.

What a strange thing to hold onto, the certainty that answers to our most profound and desperate questions about life come not because we seek the questions, or the answers, or we seek God, but because God seeks us, walking right through the walls that hardship builds around us, unrelenting in love. AND God in Jesus Christ offers us twin gifts: PEACE not as the world gives, but real Peace; and throughout the Bible "breath" has meant Holy Spirit, so by breathing on them does not mean Jesus forgot to wear his KN95 Mask, but that the Holy Spirit came upon them.

BUT FINALLY THIS MORNING, In the privacy and security of being locked in my Upper Room, I have been struggling to not turn my face away from a contemporary lynching, a public execution, that I have no answers for. My parents and Grandparents had gone to College, at the time I had not considered

education as Privilege?! But now I see that Education gave me opportunity to think and have relationships with people others never considered.

The last time I served as a Missionary in Africa, we arrived amid Political RACIAL Protests. We witnessed the smoke and gunfire, as one racial group herded another into a church, barricaded the doors and set the building on fire.

Three years ago, I went on a Mission Trip to Guatemala, where, as American Volunteers we provided the only Medical Services in that Country. The Military stood guard on the street corners throughout the days, wearing helmets and Kevlar, grenades, automatic weapons and Billy-clubs; but because of gangs and cartels, no one went out of their homes at night.

In 2001, Judy and I became sponsors through the Church of a group of Refugees from South Sudan, like Lost Lambs identified as Lost Boys. Over two decades we have been through a great deal with them. The youngest of these is now married, with children I baptized, and while he and his wife have earned College degrees, due to COVID he has been supporting his family by driving for UBER. Two weeks ago, some men got into his car, and shot him in the abdomen and arm, stating it was because he was black.

As your pastor I have repeatedly stated that this PULPIT cannot be used to push anyone's political agenda, our worship of God is too sacred, our diversity too vulnerable, and the needs of one another are too important for that to be tolerated. SO with both of those concerns, (Not hiding from my fears and doubts/ not pushing a political agenda) BUT taking our faith seriously as the people of God in this place and time, as adult believers, where we all claim one another, what are we going to say and what are we going to do about disparity in our Nation? How do we respond in faith to the Racial Fears that caused a man to put his full body weight through his knee on the neck of another man for 9 Minutes? If we are the Body of Christ, if we are the Hands of Jesus and the Voice for the voiceless, what shall we say?