

# “One Week Later”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 11, 2010*

Second Sunday of Easter

Revelation 1:1-8

Rev. John Wahl

John 21:19-30

Another Easter has come and gone. After forty days of preparing, I wish it would have lasted just a little longer. I already miss sights and sounds of the day: the special music and the flowers, the readings and hymns which make Easter worship such a festive celebration. Some of the people that were here – out-of-towners, part-timers – we know we may not see them again for a long time

But now, it's over. For those who had time off from work or school, it's now back to the same old grind. For those who traveled to see family or friends, it will be a long wait to the next holiday or vacation. And for those who were so involved in the special activities of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, it's time to settle back into a more regular schedule.

It's time to get back to normal; it's time to get back to work. Lent and Easter were a nice break from the norm, a nice change of pace, but it's time to get back to reality. And that can be hard, for the old routine is so...well, routine; and normalcy, reality, can be so appallingly unavoidable.<sup>1</sup>

Confrontations with normalcy--encounters with reality—they are hard to take because they destroy both the hopes and illusions on which we often rely. Confrontations with the harshly normal, and normally harsh, realities of life remind us that there are ends – to dreams, to relationships, to life – over which we have little control and under which we may feel as fearful as prisoners.

The Christians in Asia Minor – the original audience for Revelation – knew the disparity between being Easter people and living in the realities of a cruel world. They were a persecuted people trying to remember why there was such joy in the message of the resurrection. Two generations after Christ lived and died and rose again, they needed help making sense of their faith in the midst of trying times. How were they supposed to be encouraged when being discouraged made better sense?

So the author of Revelation begins by reminding them that God is in the world and will have the last word. He offers them a vision of the comeback of the Lord; that the days are surely coming when the kingdom will be fully realized; that

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, “Realities Old and New”

their faith in God can bridge the span between the resurrection and Christ's eventual return.

Christians know that on Easter, God in Christ defeated evil, but the reality is that evil is still very much alive. As we come down from the high of Easter, how do we answer the question, "now what?" It seems like we have been waiting a long time for this comeback of Christ – not just for two generations, but for two-thousand years.

Before Jesus appeared in their midst, the book of John tells us that the disciples were in hiding behind locked doors. They weren't out looking for Jesus. They weren't going around looking for other believers. They weren't travelling the world preaching the word. They weren't proclaiming the message of the King. They were hidden in fear, locked away in shame because they didn't believe he lived.

Jesus, the one who had earlier described himself saying, "I am the door" (John 10:7) must summon the disciples again to help them realize there is new life beyond closed doors. Jesus does this by making his own door, his own way, into their midst.

On the night of the first Easter, the disciples were huddled together behind a locked door. What were they afraid of? It may not have only been that they were worried that those who killed Jesus would kill them as well. Their fear likely went deeper. Maybe they didn't want to deal with the scorn of those who knew their mission had failed; that they had even failed at protecting Jesus. In spite of all their promises, they were ashamed of what they had done and what they had not done.<sup>2</sup>

The first words Jesus offered were a gift: "Peace be with you." He knew what was in their hearts; he knew why they had barred themselves behind closed doors. Jesus knew they weren't re-grouping, getting it together and deciding on their next move, how they were going to carry on Jesus' legacy or spread his teaching. They were scared and they were hiding out. And suddenly, in the midst of their fear and confusion, there he was, not with angels, trumpets, or legions, but quietly. And he brought with him no hint of anger. No accusations, no trouble or turmoil. Only peace.

The one disciple who was not present that Easter evening was Thomas, who we call the doubter. While the majority of the disciples were able to see and hear Jesus, this one disciple wanted his own evidence; the same kind of evidence of resurrection that the other disciples had also been given. And so, one week

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, "Crying Shame"

later, on another day of the resurrection, Jesus came back – as he does for us time and time again as we remember and celebrate the resurrection in our work and worship.

Thomas' faith was no less; he was just that one little sheep that the good shepherd sure enough would come back for, to tie up this one loose end. The point of this, Thomas not believing unless he sees with his own eyes, provided an important message for the people in John's community a generation or two later when the Gospel was being written down. Their faith was based not on what they had seen with their own eyes but on what they heard. Were they destined to be like Thomas – not able to believe without seeing – or might they be blessed without seeing?

Thomas represents our modern demand for historical proof: he wanted empirical evidence. When Jesus appears to him, however, he appears to forget all about actually placing his finger in the nail holes and his hand in Jesus' side. He instantly flips from skepticism to the most exalted confession in the New Testament: he calls Jesus "my Lord and my God." With Thomas, Jesus anticipates the needs of future believers "who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Thomas wants proof; but what he gets is presence.

So, should we remember Thomas as the agnostic, the skeptic, the doubter? Hardly, he simply had been absent, beyond the sight and sound of Jesus' presence. He was not lost, he just had not yet been able to touch and see Jesus in his midst.

Gail O'Day writes, this is the "heart of this lesson...that Jesus comes again and again to these scared and confused disciples. The disciples have not warranted a second visit by Jesus, but they get one, and a renewed gift of his peace." In the same way, she writes, if we long to see Jesus, he offers us the gift of himself, not just once, but over and over. It is, however, so hard to persist in faith: "If on Easter Sunday congregations are able to hold at bay all of their worries, concerns, and doubts and hand them over to the power of the resurrection, it does not take long for the vocabulary of death to creep back in and to push Easter out....The Easter gospel turns the world upside down, but congregations live out their days in right-side-up realities."<sup>3</sup>

In breathing upon the disciples, giving them the Spirit, Jesus quite literally "inspires" the church for its mission. The same breath that brought Adam to his feet now also sends the disciples out the door, for the gift of the Holy Spirit is not an experience disciples keep for themselves; it is equipment for mission. In John's Gospel, this is the Pentecost moment. It is when the disciples are gifted with the

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<sup>3</sup> As quoted by Kate Huey in *Weekly Seeds*

Holy Spirit and sent from behind closed doors into the world to witness to the love of God that surpasses all understanding. Even though we are a week removed from Easter, and the lilies have gone home with some of those who we will not see here again for a while, the Holy Spirit remains with us and within us.

Whatever overwhelms us this morning, God comes to us in the midst of our fear and says, "Peace be with you." Whatever doubts churn in our minds, whatever sins trouble our consciences, whatever pain and worry bind us up, whatever walls we have put up or doors we have locked securely, God comes to us and says, "Peace be with you" and then sends us out into the world, equipped with the Holy Spirit as evidence that Jesus has come to us and comes back to us again and again.

“Isn't that why [this] church is here?” Parker Palmer asks. “Isn't that the mission of your congregation: to love the world; not to enlarge membership, not to bring outsiders to accept [your] terms, but simply to love the world in every possible way – to love the world as God did and does.”<sup>4</sup> AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> Parker Palmer, “The Company of Strangers”