

Without Condemnation

Wayne Waibel – 04/24/2022

The lilies are starting to droop, and most of the leftovers have been consumed. Easter with all its fanfare and excitement is giving way to the regularness of everyday life. The Twins are in a four-way tie for last place in the division and for the most part – our little church community is getting back to normal.

With the promises of Easter last Sunday comes the inevitable question this Sunday, what now? It's perfectly natural – almost cliché and entirely predictable. I can tell you what it is not. It is not rhetorical. I really think we echo the sentiments of the disciples huddled together in a locked, unlit room – now what?

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Typically this is the Sunday we pick on poor Thomas – giving him the familiar moniker “Doubting Thomas.” As if this poor guy didn't have enough to contend with having the misfortune of sharing the name of the betrayer Judas, which is why he is given the nickname Thomas which means Twin. Now he has to be saddled with the additional burden of being the one who would not believe until he put his finger into the holes left by the nails which pierced the hands of Jesus.

His role, though seemingly unpopular, provided what was to become a direct charge from Jesus to us all, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." We all kind of use Thomas to justify our own unbelief. "Yes – I struggle with my faith, but hey – at least I'm not as reluctant as Thomas, and he was there!" As humans, we can't help but offer him up as a way to minimize our own failings.

The thing is, his unbelief wasn't as egregious as we tend to assign. A close examination reveals that when Christ invited him to touch the Master's wounds, he exclaimed, "My Lord and My God!" There is absolutely no indication that he actually touches Jesus.

It was enough for him to hear His words. Additionally, the Master was not being cross with Thomas – Jesus engaged the disciple without condemnation. This is a critical detail. Especially when taken in light of the message it allowed Christ to proclaim, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

There was much about the time immediately following Easter that sends us scrambling for answers, and direction, and sanctuary. We should take comfort in the fact that we are not alone in that. The Apostles were trying to stay hidden as much as possible.

The Sanhedrin, which was in collusion with Rome, was actively engaged in putting down any mention of the name Jesus, much less any witness to His life and mission. These were very dangerous times.

One could argue that the reformed church of which we are a part endures the pangs of persecution even today. Certainly not to the extent our first century counterparts were subjected to, but we do have to contend with declining membership and fiscal challenges to say nothing of political and civic pressures and biases.

We try our best to make our community of faith relevant, but too often fall into social entrapments that have more to do with popularity and prosperity - ultimately leading to anxiety and frustration.

When I say "we" I refer to the greater church, not this place. Sure – we have our challenges. Chief among them is our collective desire for growth while holding fast to our core values.

Much as the early Christians, ours is a crisis of perception. The reality is that God is at work among and within us, even though every day brings reminders that the promises of Easter are not fully realized. Faithfulness requires discernment, wisdom, and risk.

We lose sight of the fact that enduring the struggles of this present life are simply a prelude to feasting at the heavenly banquet. The truth is that Easter has come and gone, but fear and doubt remain.

Our call to worship this morning reminds us of the importance of praise, particularly in the face of utter despair. We must find ways to translate the words of our forebears into language and behavior that can touch both head and heart. Doing this propels us to live into our calling, which is to help ensure that God's embrace is returned by folks who did not know it was even there in the first place.

The book of Revelation is a tough one to make sense of, but there are serious lessons to be learned within it. Today's text, as elsewhere in Revelation, is best understood if you don't dwell on the imagery, but focus instead on the truth to which those images point. And today's lesson put another way is simply that God is at work in present experience, in the memory of the people, and in the hope of the future.

The example set by the Apostles after Jesus filled them with the Holy Spirit can be held up as the benchmark of true ministry. Declare the good news of the Gospel to the poor and all others – even to the ends of the earth.

Despite warnings to the contrary by whatever earthly authority, continue spreading the good news. We must learn to believe not simply in the goodness of the Lord, but in the goodness of one another.

These disciples actually felt joyous after being persecuted for their beliefs. Their trial by tribulation fulfilled what Jesus had told them would happen. To be punished for serving the Lord was to them, a supreme honor. It's how they knew they were on the right track, and it emboldened them all the more.

These eleven individuals as witnesses to the greatest story ever told managed to inspire and enlighten the whole of humanity within their reach, which proved immense. As Jesus began His ministry in Galilee and drove relentlessly to Jerusalem, the Apostles started in Jerusalem and expanded to the ends of the Roman Republic – to them – the known world. I'd call that a pretty fair start.

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So here we are. Easter has come and gone. We're left with the growing realization that our lives have been saved by the Son of God. A God who wants nothing but the best for us – His children. And still we wander aimlessly about, trying to live up to expectations that we impose upon ourselves and falling short.

The human condition can be summarized with one word – flawed. That’s kind of a harmless word in that it evokes no special horror. We know better than to think perfection is our birthright. Still – in the dimly lit room of our escape from the tyranny of the world – we must always remember that Jesus appeared in the locked room of fear and spoke His word of peace.

The good news is that all have fallen short of the kingdom of God. It’s kind of a comfort to know we are not alone in our failings. And as an Easter people we are resolved to the glory of the life of love that God preordains through His beloved Son, Jesus the Christ.

When all is said and done, now that the tomb is empty, and the glory of the Lord shows round about, the resounding chorus that echoes back from the question “What now,” is – we don’t even need to ask the question.

Because the God of our fathers is the Alpha and the Omega.

The beginning and the end.

Who is and who was and who is to come.

What now? Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Amen.