

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
A NEW COVENANT COMMUNITY  
John 20:19-31  
April 11, 2010  
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

In Christ, God created a new covenant community that transcends the ties of kinship and homeland, race and language, politics and economics. It is our task to grow the church here on earth to resemble Christ's invisible community in glory.

The disciples feared the same fate that befell Jesus, so they bolted the doors. But Christ appeared in their midst, breathing on them forgiveness and hope. Such post-resurrection appearances were not experienced by everyone.

If we only believed in things we could see, we would be reduced to a radically diminished form of life. If we only believed in what could be proved scientifically, our lives would be flat and unfulfilling. But we believe in many things we cannot see: love, justice, hope, and peace as realities that can create a better world for all people.

Some of Jesus' most familiar words are called the Beatitudes. They are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, with Matthew recording eight beatitudes and Luke only four. In both Gospels they introduce Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, but they have been spoken at various times by Jesus. The word "**beatitude**" comes from the Latin word "*beatus*," that means "**made happy.**" "*Blessed are . . .*" literally means, "*Happy are . . .*" The beatitudes express those virtues, or qualities of character, that Jesus apparently expected all of us to possess. In addition to these gathered beatitudes, there are single beatitudes at various places in the Gospels. One of them may be seen as a uniquely "**Easter beatitude**" on this second Sunday of Easter.

Nicknames are popular, but mostly when they belong to someone else! Nicknames have amazing staying power, whether they are deserved or not. Doubting Thomas is an example. The nickname has stuck for two thousand years!

Thomas deserves a bit of a break. In his place most of us would have reacted exactly as he did. When the resurrected Jesus first appeared to the disciples, Thomas was absent. When his colleagues told him that Jesus was alive, Thomas was unable to believe it. ***“Unless I see and touch the wounds from his crucifixion in his hands and in his side, I will not believe.”*** For this he was branded with his famous nickname.

In fairness, we must acknowledge that Thomas was only asking for the kind of evidence the other disciples already had. His problem wasn't doubt as much as absenteeism. Thomas was an honest and courageous disciple. When Jesus was preparing his disciples for the time when he would no longer be with them, he said, ***“And you know the way where I am going.”*** Thomas answered, ***“Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”*** (Jn 14:5) Earlier, when Jesus insisted on going to Jerusalem in spite of death threats against him, Thomas said, ***“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”*** (Jn 11:16) Despite these earlier pictures of Thomas, he was not called Brave Thomas or Honest Thomas, but Doubting Thomas.

Thomas' nickname indicates what a negative subject doubt is for most of us. But doubt is indispensable to a viable and mature faith. Gullibility is a greater danger than doubt. When Thomas had the evidence he needed, his confession of faith could not have been more profound: ***“My Lord and my God!”***

For many people Christianity's biggest stumbling block is the resurrection of Jesus. It is difficult to argue with his teachings, and it is impossible to find fault with his manner of life or his sacrificial death. But the claim that God raised him from the dead is simply too much for some people to accept. How is it possible that a human being actually died, as we all must die, and was brought back to life? This question has led to theories about what actually happened, such as the ***“swoon theory,”*** that suggests Jesus did not die but was in a semi-conscious state when he was placed in the tomb. Another theory is that the disciples moved the dead body of Jesus and fabricated the story of his resurrection. None of these theories adequately accounts for the clear claim of the New Testament that Jesus died and was raised from the dead.

Our Easter beatitude is part of Jesus' response to Thomas' confession of faith. Jesus said, ***“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”*** What did Jesus mean? Is he advocating belief based on mere hearsay? Is he promoting soft thinking and blind acceptance?

Perhaps Jesus is saying that if we only believe what we can see, we will not only have a very flat world-view, but faith of any kind will be impossible. Christian faith, and certainly Easter faith, is not based on empirical evidence but on a conviction about what is ultimately real and true. Faith has more to do with who Jesus is than with historical data about his life. Faith is more about seeing with the eyes of the heart than with physical sight.

The key ingredient in meaningful relationships is not proof, but trust. The strongest evidence of a loving and committed relationship is not an iron-clad legal contract, but mutual trust. The strongest evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is not some archeological discovery, nor is it a piece of scientific evidence about the resuscitation of a corpse. The evidence supporting belief in Christ's resurrection is in the lives of those who saw and believed, as well as those who did not see, yet believed. The sudden and dramatic change in the disciples must be explained. Two days earlier they had fled in fear and hopelessness. The emergence of the Christian movement out of such overwhelming defeat, as well as its remarkable growth, must be explained. If Christ was not raised from the dead, what happened?

We do not need to know how the resurrection happened. We do not believe in Jesus because of his resurrection. We believe in his resurrection because of what we have come to believe about him. It isn't a miracle that compels us to believe, but the unique quality of his life. And across the ages those who have trusted in the living Christ have experienced for themselves the amazing power of his resurrection. *To whom else shall we go? He has the words of life.* The Easter affirmation, "**Christ is risen!**" is not merely an historical claim. It is a testimony to what we have discovered to be true. The Easter message is confirmed in our own lives, as death is continually being transformed into life.

Enlightenment thinking has worked with the assumption that "**seeing is believing.**" A post-modern view of knowledge, however, insists that "**believing is seeing.**" We tend to see what our belief systems condition us to see. If we wear rose-colored glasses, we see a rose-colored world. Everyone, therefore, lives by faith, in the most literal sense of the word. We perceive reality largely in terms of what expectations, or faith, we bring to it.

We are the blessed, who have not seen, yet believed. Amen.

If the message of Easter has been confirmed in your life, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.