**Nu’uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

 **United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai’i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon April 19, 2020**

**SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

GREETING/CALL TO WORSHIP **—**Rev. Mindi (Melinda Mitchell), rev-o-ution.org. (Alt.)

The tomb was found empty.
Jesus has risen and comes to us saying,
 “Peace be with you!”
Therefore, do not doubt, but believe!
Come, let us walk the journey of faith,

acknowledging our doubts but holding on to hope,

let us worship and celebrate—

 *for Christ is Risen!*

OPENING SENTENCES

As the day begins to brighten, God is shining new light into our lives that dismisses sadness, and exposes our fears. Everything we carry is brought into God’s light of hope, the dawn of possibility. Therefore, let us open our hearts and lives to Christ’s resurrection power that knows no boundaries that we may be filled with incredible joy, everlasting peace and unquenchable hope this day and always.

Call to Reconciliation

 by Thom Shuman, *Lectionary Liturgies;* lectionaryliturgies.blogspot.com. Alt.

When we keep our faults and failures locked safely away, we have no need to confess. But God comes into our hearts when we least expect it, so we can be filled with forgiveness, with hope, with peace. Please join me as we pray, praying:

**God of empty tombs and empty people:**

**When we hesitate to speak of your hope, forgive us, and give us voice.**

**When we find it difficult to love another, forgive us, and give us new compassion.**

**When we want to stand with the high and mighty, forgive us, and put us next to the poor and oppressed.**

**When we stay locked behind our fears and doubts, forgive us, and send us out to share your grace.**

**When we cannot believe your Word of new life, forgive us, and fill us with your joy.  Amen.**

Let us keep a short silence to reflect on what we have prayed.

AN Assurance

Dearly beloved of Christ, our Savior comes into every shadowed corner of our lives with the light of Easter. Christ comes into the locked rooms of our faults, and gifts us with grace and hope. Christ comes to fill us with peace, that we may proclaim the good news.

So, with all your hearts, rejoice and receive God’s mercy and forgiveness!

A READING FROM THE GOSPELS

 John 20:19-31 *The Risen Christ Visits the Disciples*

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘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.’

26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ 27Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ 28Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ 29Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’

30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

SERMON *No Doubt, Thomas!*

Thomas. I always find myself feeling sorry for Thomas because this is the only story for which he is remembered.

We forget that, earlier in this Gospel [11:16], it was Thomas who was an eager and courageous supporter of his teacher, Jesus. When Jesus announces he was going to return to Judea to be with Mary and Martha (because their brother Lazarus had died), the other disciples cautioned against such a visit. They remind Jesus how his last visit there had almost gotten him stoned to death by an angry crowd.

Thomas was the only one who stood-up for Jesus and the trip back. He was even *eager* to go—to accompany Jesus and he says he is even ready to die with him. We might have called him “faithful” or “courageous” Thomas, but that story is forgotten, isn’t it?

This is the one we remember.

If only we could bring ourselves to remember that other moment (in chapter 14), when Jesus was explaining what was going to happen to him in Jerusalem. Jesus tells his disciples “there are many dwelling places” in his Father’s house, and that they already know the way there. When we read that story, we sometimes may remember him as “Confused” or perhaps “Inquiring Thomas.” Because Thomas was the one who interrupted Jesus saying, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

This question prompted Jesus to declare very directly: “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” [14:6]

But, no, those other stories are forgotten in light of this one.

Perhaps this is because of the way Thomas chooses to express himself. First, instead of believing what his is told by his friends, and fellow disciples, Thomas demands proof. What is more, his is a rather caustic, visceral demand for proof. I will not believe, he says: “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…” [20:25]

His words must have been deeply shocking to the rest of the group—not only because of the graphic nature of his demand, but it also violated the purity laws under which they all still lived which says that to touch a dead body, or to come in contact with blood was to become contaminated. Those who even brushed against a dead body or had anything to do with blood would be defiled, even degraded and would need to go immediately to a priest to be made whole again and ready to enter back into polite society.

Saying such a thing probably caused the other disciples to involuntarily flinch, or recoil from him. I can well imagine someone gasping and shrinking back away from him.

So, this is how we remember him. We remember his irritated, impatient demand—we remember this one last *requirement* he has for Jesus—before he will believe. Because of it, we have even modified his name, for all time.

He is not just Thomas. He isn’t Thomas the Apostle. He is *Doubting* Thomas.

Frankly, I think this is unfair, and I think we have misread Thomas’ reaction for all these many centuries. When I think of Thomas, and this particular story, I find myself wondering why he was not with the rest of the disciples.

Think of it: the others were still cowering behind a locked door—this is one of the most important points that the Gospel wants us to see: that the risen Christ came and stood among them *despite the fact that the door was locked!*

Except for Thomas, the others were all there. Thomas was the only one who had ventured beyond their hiding place.

That is the trouble I have with this story. I want to know why Thomas was not also hiding with the rest of them.

Could it be that he had volunteered, or was the one who had been chosen to go out and get provisions for the rest of them? If so, then I can well imagine his disappointment at having missed such an important event. In fact, in light of that, I can hear the frustration and distress in his words. He is like someone who has come late to a party only to be told: “you should have been here a few minutes ago!” that he “Missed Out.”

Could it be his being out of the room was as simple as his own need for a breath of fresh air after being cooped-up with the others for more than a day? In which case, I can imagine his voice being filled with frustration and feelings of being left out—“if only I had not gone out at *that* moment!”

Missed-out or left out. I can imagine that Thomas was feeling both things, and in that moment, he uttered the words that would make him famous (or *in*famous) for all time.

However, when we really think about it, Thomas was not asking for anything that the others had not already received:

Mary Magdalene had seen and almost hugged the risen Christ outside the tomb.

When Mary told her experience to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved they were not content to take her word for it. They went to the tomb to see the thing for themselves.

This is what Thomas is doing. He is demanding that he be able to “see for himself”…and the thing is…that is exactly what risen Christ gives him.

A week later, the disciples are still together with the door locked, and Christ comes to stand among them. In this visit, he very deliberately turns to Thomas and offers him what Thomas has said he needs in order to believe—in order to be one again with Christ.

In Christ’s return to the room, Thomas does more than “see.” He is invited to see for himself. He is invited to have his own experience of the love of God—a love so strong that a locked door cannot keep it out, and death itself is conquered.

This is what God wants each of us to have, too—an experience of seeing the resurrection. We cannot “see” the way Thomas and the others did that first Easter morning…or even a week later in the locked room. However, we can “see” the resurrection. We *do* *see* the resurrection. It is here with us now, and always will be.

The resurrection is seen each and every time love conquers fear, and there is a lot of that all around us right now—perhaps *especially* right now. We can see and experience the presence of the living Christ when we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us even when we are frightened; when we think there is no hope left.

You are experiencing the resurrection as you watch and worship in front of a computer or television screen today! Our Sanctuary is closed, but God’s love and the Spirit found another way for us to be together—it found another way for the Spirit to gather us…and it always will.

The Spirit, you see, is God’s love and it has been around us for a long, long time. It has and is in all of the people who are working so hard right now—in hospitals, of course, but also in grocery stores, and restaurants offering take-out orders which keeps their people on the pay role but also frees a lot of us from having to cook, in automotive garages, like when I had to have my car towed just last week with a flat tire. God’s love—which is embodied in the resurrection—is in all of the essential tasks that we need and that continue to be performed, even though it puts ourselves and others at risk.

God’s love and the Spirit—which is the resurrection in motion—has lived and worked in the midst of this community of faith, and you all have seen it here, and I am just getting to know of its history here.

This past week, as I was reading *The Dendo*, I saw the Spirit and experienced the resurrection over and over again there in the history of this church, and especially in the missionary movement that brought Shinichi Aoki to Hawaii to “preach the way” to the many who came all this way from Japan to work for a better life for themselves and their families.

Before him, in 1874, the Spirit inspired a deep love for his people to know Christ in the heart and life Jo H. Neesima. Indeed, it led him to make an appeal to the American Board of Missions in Massachusetts for funds to start a Christian college in Japan. So passionate was his petition that $5,000 was raised for the effort—a really huge sum in those days.

Despite challenges in getting such a foreign endeavor started, Neesima started Doshisha University in Kyoto—where Aoki was educated—and which remains an important place of Christian outreach and higher education even to this day.

The past and the present come together on the grounds of this church. When we walk through the rooms of our church, or across the grass or in the gardens around it, we are surrounded by a love and faith that was and is so strong that is could not be stopped but went forth—through time and all sorts of situations and circumstances. Through the years, whenever love was stronger than fear, or worse—apathy or self-satisfaction—lives were touched, something new and creative was embraced, and God’s love made more and more people whole.

This is the *real* story of Thomas that God wants us to know and to remember. Not Thomas’ doubt, but that God is able, and is willing, to raise Christ from the grave so that he might meet us where we are, and show us the marks on his hand and side—the love that endured so much. Not Thomas’ doubt, but that God is able, and is willing to show us what we need—the effort and service for others—so that we may believe, be inspired, and then move on to glorify God’s name by loving and serving others.

In doing this, we become the embodiment of the resurrection, and our future is to be the evidence of God’s love that others want and need. We become the vessel of God’s love that can replace doubt with faith, and fear with love—our lives become a celebration and a reflection that may cause ourselves and others to exclaim: Christi is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE & THE LORD’S PRAYER

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise God all creatures here below;

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Praise God above, ye heavenly host;

Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

**BENEDICTION**

Friends, go from this place knowing that the risen Christ goes ahead of you. There is no one you will encounter, no circumstance you will face, no event that will occur that is beyond the redemptive reach of our risen Lord. For Jesus is already there, at work, drawing all the world to himself. In that power, you are sent to be messengers of his grace and love. Amen.