

Psalm 111
John 20:19-31
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee
April 16, 2023

“Unless I See”

Early in 2020, before the pandemic had shut the world down, I was invited to join a clergy lectionary study group. This group was established in 1983 when a group of pastors (mostly men at the time), in the age pre-internet research and easy access to resources, decided to come together and share scholarship, sermon ideas, and write academic papers to assist each other with sermon writing and preparation. Over the years, they expanded and invited a more diverse range of pastors to join them. When I was initially invited, I was the only associate pastor in the group, and honestly, I was super intimidated. Their makeup in 2020 was composed of some of the original members along with scholars whose books I had read, several seminary presidents (including my own former seminary president), and respected ministers of what we would call “big steeple churches” with memberships over 2000. Being invited in, I definitely felt what you might call “imposter syndrome” but with some encouragement from friends I accepted the invitation. We would meet over zoom as the pandemic took over, but we finally had our first in-person meeting since the time I had joined in January of this year.

It was wonderful. And at the end of that life giving time together, there was a shift on the last day of what felt like a great exodus. Several of the members decided it was time to retire from the group and open their seat to a new member. Many had already been retired from ministry and some just felt it was time. As we took time to honor each of those folks and thank them, we asked them what seed of wisdom they might share with us. It was all varied, but I cannot forget when one of them turned and asked us this question: “How do you all feel serving a church and denomination in decline when you still have many years of ministry to go?”

He continued to explain how when he was called into ministry, it was in the days when people came to church and made it a priority; when offering plates were full no matter how terrible his sermons were. The “good old days” when people always brought his family an extra ham on Easter and cookies on Christmas; when folks got married in churches and didn’t go away to college

and took over family businesses and stayed in town and continued attending the church they grew up in.

“So how do you all feel serving a church and denomination in decline?” he asked us. “Because the world is different now and I am glad I’m retired. I do not know if I would go into ministry today.”

It wasn’t exactly a motivational pep talk but it did move us into minutes of silent reflection.

It is a good question. Why do I choose to minister and pastor the (big C) Church that is in decline? In these days when something like 3,500 Christian churches close their doors every year? Why are you all here? You who live in the reality of a society that scoffs at religion, that thinks you are strange for going to church, and when the dominant narrative of Christianity in the U.S. seems so against the love, welcome, and healing of the risen Christ?

And as we all sat in silence, when the first person spoke, their response was what the rest of us were thinking and feeling. The truth is, for some of us, like me, as an Asian American woman, even in the past 14 years of ordained ministry, I have felt the shift of my own leadership being resisted to now very welcomed in our denomination. I am sure that Pastor Marge and Pastor Evie can tell you even more stories of the shift they have felt as women in ministry over the even longer years of serving the church. And what we each began to say in different ways is that even as we are not sure exactly what is going to happen, we still feel committed and called to this task, because we believe and know the God we serve is still doing a new thing. Our job is to continue to perceive it and our call is to help others see it. Or comedically put in the words of Miracle Max in the 1987 classic movie, “The Princess Bride,” as he puffs back the main character Westley back to life with a wooden contraption and something that looks like a chocolate whopper, “Mostly dead is slightly alive.”

How do we see the slightly alive? Friends, as we come into this Eastertide, we are all being called in this next chapter of being the Church together to be proclaimers of the resurrection. Because to answer a call to ministry in these days or be a faithful church goer, we need to believe in resurrection...that new life can come from what is dead, is dying, and that death is not the final word. We need to see the slightly alive. We need to see it and then we need to share it.

The problem is that resurrection is not work that everyone wants to engage in...and even when new life seems obvious, there is often resistance to seeing it because it changes things and how things used to be. As our scripture tells us, even from that first day when some of the disciples found the tomb empty, we've always been a little resistant to resurrection, believing it and perceiving it. Yes, just last Sunday, we celebrated Easter, the pinnacle of our faith story to celebrate the power of God's love and as Pastor Evie shared, "and to remember that death and despair cannot, do not, will not, have the last word." And you might think that the joy of the good news of the risen Christ was instantaneous...that everyone got it, understood it, and rejoiced upon hearing it.

But one verse later, after we heard that Peter and the other disciple went and saw the empty tomb, even after Mary recognizes Jesus and goes and tells the disciples that she has seen the Lord and everything he said to her, on the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the disciples were locked up in a house in fear. They were still grieving, still afraid, still doubting and could not absorb what they had seen or heard.

I don't want to overlook this part too quickly and then only accuse Thomas of doubting. Because they were ALL afraid, they were all hiding and doubting, even after hearing that Jesus was alive. Even when new life seems obvious, there is often resistance to seeing or trusting it, especially if it looks different from what we are used to or comfortable with.

And so go back with me to last Easter Sunday where we shouted Christ is risen and had our hearts stirred with those words that death and despair cannot, do not, will not, have the last word. Do you remember what happened the next day? Right after the high of that good news for the world, less than 24 hours later that proclamation felt squashed as we heard news of yet another mass shooting in Louisville, Kentucky. More death. More of the same. And no changes. It feels safer to lock ourselves behind closed doors than to believe that God is doing the impossible. And yet, even despite the grief, fear and doubt those first disciples were feeling, God had done the impossible. They just could not see or perceive it yet.

My friend and former co-moderator of General Assembly, the Rev. Denise Anderson, recently shared, "To be an Easter people is to live in the perpetual

shadow of death and have the temerity to proclaim that God-and we-are more powerful than it.” She continued, “I am tired. I am weary of more of the same. My body bears the emotional and physical scars of constant terror. Yet, I'm fixing my gaze on an empty tomb and carrying the foolishness of the good news wherever I run, because I refuse to let anything keep us from that which is rightfully ours to claim. And if I can't claim it for myself, I'll claim it for our progeny...Let us walk together...”

And so this tells me, friends, that resurrection and believing it is difficult-not for the God who does it, but for those who find it. It may not seem as obvious as we once understood it to be. More to the point, how do we live into new life, resurrection life, in a time when death seems to be in charge? How will you see it? Will you have the temerity to proclaim that God is more powerful? In the mostly dead, can you see the slightly alive?

Those disciples who knew Christ best were huddled up in fear behind locked doors. Friends, the incredible grace given to them in that moment was that Jesus comes to them, he comes to them, stands before them, shows them his wounds as proof, breathes Spirit upon each of them and says “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me so I send you.” God knew that was exactly what they needed in that moment. To that I say, “Lucky ducks. I want that too, please.”

Later, when Thomas says “until I see” and asks for proof to see the mark in Jesus’ hands and in his side, (just like the others did, by the way), Jesus comes, without judgment (unlike us, because we’re all judging poor Thomas), and allows him to do just this.

I think we as the church like to judge Thomas and label him the doubter because it makes us feel good to know that someone else who should have known better struggled more with the news of resurrection and wanted proof. But instead of casting Thomas as some kind of failure for doubting, what if we allowed ourselves to be okay with aligning ourselves with Thomas and the rest of the disciples in this story. What if we are being invited to also say “Unless I see him for myself, I won’t believe” as we feel skeptical and wary of all that seems like death in this world. Because Thomas, just like the others, wants that living encounter with God too. He wants to see life for himself. This is the week, after Easter, that we are allowed to want that too...It’s okay to hold in tension the fear, doubt, and skepticism we feel along with the belief

that God is making all things new, even if we have not seen it yet for ourselves. Church, I believe that being honest about wanting proof, trusting the unknown and acknowledging our doubts is the way to be faithful. Because God will show up. Maybe not on our time, but new life comes and shows us proof and grants us peace.

Holding the tension of the already and not yet. Mostly dead and slightly alive. Wanting to see and know proof for ourselves and seeking to find those places of life. This is the life the week after Easter Sunday. Friends, if this proclamation today seems pretty anticlimactic, theologian Debie Thomas asks us to consider this: “When Thomas’s doubts meet Jesus’s wounds, new life erupts, faith blossoms, and the doubting disciple becomes an apostle of the good news. Resurrection happens all over again.”

Friends, wherever you are in this faith journey, know that in this place, you are welcome as you are. Earlier I asked, “Why are *you* here?” But what I want to say is, You are welcome here. You don’t need to know why you’re here. We are glad. We will celebrate with you when you are sure of your faith and bursting with hope and joy, and we will walk alongside you and listen when you seek proof, struggle with doubt and fear, and have not yet experienced what others around you seem to already know of the living God in Christ. Even as death surrounds us, new life springs up from the ground. It might not look the same way you’re used to seeing it, but it’s there. During this week after and in this Eastertide, may we find the courage, hope, and seeing that we need because this resurrection life is yours to claim. May it be so.

We believe. Help our unbelief.
Amen.