

April 8, 2018 – Journey worship service

TEXT: John 20:19–31

TITLE: A Long Day's Night

THEME: Reclaiming Our Spirit

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Typically, Thomas is lambasted every time this passage is preached. Thomas was not hiding in the locked room with the other followers when Jesus suddenly appeared the evening of his resurrection. On that particular evening, Thomas did not receive the two blessings Jesus gave the others, nor did Thomas witness Jesus showing the others his pierced hands and side. Thomas wasn't there to rejoice with the others, nor did Thomas receive Jesus' commission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Thomas did not receive the Holy Spirit Jesus breathed on to empower the others. So, it wasn't outside the realm of reason for Thomas to want to see for himself the nail marks in Jesus' hands or Jesus' side where the sword was thrust in order to believe. Thomas wasn't as fickle or doubtful as we have characterized him to be for so long.

No one really knows why Thomas wasn't with the other followers of Christ that evening or what he was doing. One commentator speculated that perhaps Thomas had broken fellowship because he wanted to be alone with his grief, when he should have been with the group. This commentator goes on to say, together the followers could have mutually strengthened one another and Thomas would not have missed Jesus when he appeared before everyone else. If Thomas had been there that long day's night, he might not have asked questions that have marked him as a doubter, someone who was unbelieving about the resurrection of Jesus for thousands of years.

Jesus said to Thomas: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." There's really no reason for us to believe either. We weren't there when Jesus shared the meal with his disciples in the upper room; we weren't there when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. We weren't there when Jesus was taken into custody, stood trial before a kangaroo court and found guilty of being King of the Jews. We weren't there when Jesus was nailed to the cross, gave up his spirit and died. We weren't there early morning on the third day at the tomb when Mary Magdalene discovered the rolled away stone. We weren't there as Mary conversed with the two angels and then spoke with the presumed gardener. We weren't there when Jesus called Mary by name, and she realized she was in the presence of the risen Lord. We weren't there when Mary ran to proclaim to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and told them the things he said to her.

Some situations may cause us to wonder whether the whole incarnate God and resurrection is real, and there may be times when we question whether God really exists. We read about the God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac and Jacob; we know the story of the Hebrew peoples' faithlessness and God's continual faithfulness; we know that in the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God—but do we really know God and do we really believe? After all, everything we

believe about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Christ is based on the account of others.

Don't we want to see proof that God is real, that God is in control, that God is working everything out for our good? The economy is fairly good, unemployment is low and yet people are still homeless, hungry and poor. Educational opportunities are plentiful, but they are not equally accessible or equitable for everyone. The bill of rights and non-discrimination legislation is in place and yet certain groups of people are still discriminated against. We have laws to determine who can legally own and carry weapons, yet people are losing their lives to gun violence in schools, workplaces, restaurants and on the streets. Lord, we believe, help our unbelief.

In reality, the other disciples were unbelieving too. According to the author of the Gospel of John, in spite of Mary Magdalene's declaration earlier in the day that she had seen the Lord, the disciples were hiding in a locked room in fear of the Jewish authorities. Even though they didn't ask for proof that Jesus was the risen Savior when he suddenly appeared in the room, Jesus offered them proof by showing them his nail marked hands and his side where he had been pierced by the sword. Jesus gave them proof they didn't ask for, but probably were hoping to receive.

I declare that Thomas was not a doubter, but an honorable and virtuous follower of Christ. He refused to say he understood what he didn't or to profess to believe what he had not witnessed. In *In Memoriam*, Tennyson wrote: "There lives more faith in honest doubt." Quite possibly, people who insist on being sure have more faith, than those who casually repeat that which they haven't taken the time to think through, ponder within their hearts or seek God in prayer concerning. Doubt sometime leads to certainty.

Twice, Jesus offered a blessing of peace to the followers gathered in the room on the evening of that long day's night and a week later Jesus offered the same blessing to Thomas: "Peace be with you." These words were familiar to the hearers, as Jesus had spoken the same earlier: "*My peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... Let not your hearts be troubled or afraid, my Father will send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said... And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe* (Matthew 14:26, 27, 29).

On that long day's night, Jesus breathed upon the disciples and said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit," empowering and commissioning them to go forth from that place to be the church: to feed the physically and spiritually hungry; to comfort the grieving and downhearted; to stand for righteousness and justice; to heal the sick and infirmed and to love as they are loved.

Beloved, Jesus breathes the same into every circumstance and unbelief in our lives. Even though we weren't there, Jesus promised to send the Advocate to lead us into all understanding, indwell us, and to make intercessions on our behalf. And that same Advocate speaks peace into every life situation where there is chaos, violence or

unrest. That same Advocate speaks healing where there is sickness, separation or brokenness. That same Advocate shows up in the most unlikely places to assure us that we are not alone and to empower us to go forth.

The Journey theme this month is *Reclaiming our Spirit*—but in actuality people of God, it is the spirit of God that has claimed and reclaims us. On that long day's night, in the absence of Thomas, the followers of Christ received the Holy Spirit. However eight days later, all of them, including Thomas were in a room with a shut door once again, and Jesus appeared, addressed and answered Thomas' questions. Perhaps Jesus came yet again to reinforce everyone's belief and faith. And Jesus does the same for us: in our weakness, Jesus is strong; when we falter, the Spirit of God rises up to encourage, emboldened and empower. Jesus shines light into darkness. In situations of hopelessness and despair, Jesus' faithfulness is evident and out of death, Jesus effected resurrection, abundant and eternal life.

The closing verse of John 20 confirms: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But 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."

Amen