

April 28, 2019 – Journey worship

TEXT: John 20:19–29

TITLE: Confident Kevin & Doubting Thomas

A couple weeks ago, I had an interesting and disturbing encounter with a visitor to our church. His name was Kevin and he checked in at the front desk and asked to speak with a pastor saying he had some questions about our doctrines. He was probably in his 20s, attractive, white, married and living somewhere north of Pittsburgh. Kevin wouldn't share details about where he worked or why he'd come to ELPC out of all the churches one could visit in Pittsburgh, but my sense is that our reputation for inclusion was well-known to him. I spoke about our reliance on scripture, on seeking to live into the justice of Jesus Christ, and about our intentional commitment to being a diverse, inclusive church. When I touched on the subject of homosexuality and same gender weddings, he brought up one of the anti-gay verses from the New Testament and argued that my interpretation of this doctrine was wrong. For everything I offered, he had an answer. The responses he gave were delivered with a quiet assurance and righteousness. It was frustrating, because for all his outward appearance of humanity, all I felt from Kevin was a lack of compassion. In the end, I stopped the conversation and acknowledged that if my greatest sin was that I had accepted and welcomed too many people into the life of our church, I was willing to live with that. Kevin left but then wrote this email to our church the next day:

Dear ELPC: I hope this email finds you well. I had a conversation with Mr. Bush the other day. Although we discussed clear falsehood and error in his doctrine on same sex "marriage" he refused to repent or to advise his congregation to do likewise. This is false and not right theology. I encourage whoever finds this email to study the scripture for yourself. Do not let a man who is deceived continue to lead you astray. I urge you to repent and turn from your sin; your eternity is on the line. May the Lord grant you repentance in Jesus' name. Amen. I guess you can all consider yourselves warned.

I thought about Kevin for several days after our encounter. I remembered the time that Jesus met a rich young ruler who knelt before him and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus reminded him of the commandments: You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother." The man answered, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." At which point Jesus said, "You lack one thing: go, sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The story ends with the young man walking away grieving, for he had many possessions.

We routinely hear this story of the rich young man around Stewardship season, as a reminder to share what God has provided us with and not to hoard our wealth so it becomes a false idol and barrier to following Christ. But after talking with Kevin, I realized that Jesus' words don't have to be limited to a discussion of wealth. There are lots of things we hoard and hold onto, things that give us comfort and assurance, things

we worship instead of trusting in God with our heart, mind, soul and strength. Sometimes one of things we covet is our desire to be absolutely right about our faith—our insistence that what we believe is the only way to believe. When Kevin left, I doubted any words I'd offered had gotten through his Christian armor. It made me sad—and as he left, I thought about how Jesus might have felt when the rich young man walked away from him.

Here we are on the Sunday after Easter. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. He appeared to the women and to the disciples—well, at least most of the disciples. Thomas wasn't with the group when Jesus appeared in their midst that Easter evening. When I re-read the passage from John 20 about good ol' Doubting Thomas, it got me thinking about Kevin—about the similarities and differences between these two disciples of Jesus Christ.

We forget that the initial reaction to Jesus' resurrection was not simply happiness and joy. When the disciples were huddled together behind locked doors that Easter evening, about 12 hours had elapsed since the women had discovered the empty tomb early that morning. Since that discovery at dawn, people had been telling the story about the missing body and reported resurrection. Lots of people were still in Jerusalem for the Passover. Lots of people had heard the stories about Jesus and seen him crucified on Friday. And the same people who had shouted for Jesus' death were still around, reinforced by Romans with plenty of reasons to squelch the slightest hint of public unrest or religious riots.

That's why the disciples were gathered behind a locked door—and why the first words out of the risen Christ's mouth to them were: *Peace be with you*. In fact he said it twice to them. Some things in life are worth repeating. You can't say "I love you" or "I'm sorry" or "I'm here for you" often enough. In a troubled and hurting world, a double helping of Jesus' peace is very welcome indeed.

All we're told about that initial encounter with Christ is that he breathed on them the Holy Spirit—that Spirit of strength, of grace and mercy that comes from God and is freely given to us. Now a breath exhaled still needs to be inhaled by its recipients. Christ offers us the Spirit of faith; we are to receive that Spirit in order to fully benefit from its blessing. Hence the old Reformed theology statement: *We are saved by grace through faith*. God in Christ does the saving work; we are to respond, to breathe it in, and accept this good news faithfully.

Anyway, when all this happened, Thomas wasn't there. When he did show up, the others quickly said to him, "We have seen the Lord." I'm sure Thomas was disappointed and angry at missing out—angry at feeling left out—unsure how to process this news. It had already been a crazy day, an unsettling and potentially dangerous day. Now he finds out everyone but him had seen Christ. So Thomas draws a line in the sand, spiritually crossing his arms across his chest and declares he doesn't believe them. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger on those marks, I will not believe."

Now before we get too hard on Thomas, we need to admit—How often have we drawn our own lines in the sand? How often have we crossed our arms and said, “Either you believe this or you’re all wrong.” Kevin walked into our church, asked to see a pastor, and was quite clear that ELPC was theologically wrong and needed to repent. Yet in honesty, if I walked across the street to Northway church in the Kelly Strayhorn or down towards Oakland to Ascension Anglican church, I too would be tempted to corner someone about their anti-gay theology and feel quite confident they needed to repent their distortion of the faith. How often in the past year have we thought “No real person of faith could have voted for Trump” (even though many did) even as others said “No person of faith could have supported Hillary” (even though many did as well). As we enter into another fraught political season, how tempting will it be to say “True believers will only support Bernie, Biden, Beto, Booker or Buttigieg”—or say, “Faithful voters are the ones who line up behind Kamala, Kristen, Elizabeth, or Amy.”

As I’ll talk more about in the second service, Easter is all about change. It was about change on God’s terms, not ours: The dead raised to life. The powerful upended by those on the margins. The women in the dark bearing the light of the world. Easter change is something that comes to us through the eyes and experiences of others—the church proclamation for 2000 years, the scriptures witness passed along through the generations, those first disciples, men and women, who saw the risen Christ and believed. Thomas missed out on the first appearance of Christ, but he got a second chance. Jesus said to him—and more importantly, said to us, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

My point is this: When Kevin came to our church to question our doctrines, I don’t know what was truly in his heart—what his motivation was or even what his story was. He simply came, argued, and left with his own self-assurance about our need for repentance. Like the rich young man who questioned Jesus and then heard an answer he didn’t like, Kevin simply walked away. I don’t know if the rich young man ever circled back to truly follow Jesus—having got rid of his possessions, the things he clung to that he valued more than discipleship. I hope one day he did. And I don’t know if Kevin will ever accept a gospel that is more inclusive than he can ever imagine—more guided by grace than legalism—and whether he will let go of his self-righteousness for the risky, loving, life-changing faith offered by the living Christ. I hope one day he does.

Thomas, for all of his bluster, never gave up on his friends. He never rejected them or their testimony. Thomas stayed with them. He ate and prayed, talked and questioned with them. In time he too saw the risen Christ. In time he believed and ironically would go out into the world telling the very same story he’d initially rejected the first time he heard it. That’s why we remember and celebrate how Easter is about change—good change, life-giving change, change that challenges our absolutes—even our absolutes about what we thought it means to be a faithful follower of the Lord.

Christ is still blowing upon us his Holy Spirit. Receive his gift. Forgive sins as you have been forgiven. Believe even when you have not seen it all for yourself. Because all that

matters is that Jesus Christ is alive and risen and sending us out into the world. Let us go wherever he leads us. Amen.