First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
May 1, 2011
Rev. Bob Garrard
Worship Theme: More Gifts of the Resurrection
Acts 2:14a, 22–32; 1 Peter 1:3–9; John 20:19–31

"Ours is a visually oriented society. Many would rather see a sermon than hear one any day -- preferably on a jumbotron located at the front of the sanctuary." I am grateful we have not done that here even though I know "images capture our imagination more than words. Consequently, we spend more time watching television than we do reading. Even our music is visual, what with MTV, VH1, and the Nashville Network. Big bucks are paid to advertising agencies and design teams to make the products we buy appealing to the eye, irrespective of whether or not they are useful. Magazine ads and television commercials use only the most attractive among us to represent their products, knowing that if it isn't eye-catching, it likely isn't sellable." "Emphasis," May 1, 2011.

And so it was for Thomas, the disciple who had not been present when the resurrected Jesus first appeared to the other disciples. He had heard the excited and sincere testimony of his colleagues, yet words were not enough. He needed something eye-catching to be convinced: "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." Thomas was not being a doubter as too many versions of the Bible call him. He simply lacked the gift of faith to believe. He needed to see the reality of the Risen Lord in order for the gift of faith to be activated in him. This may be true for people around us who do not have faith. They may not have yet seen enough evidence of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ in our actions for the gift of faith to be activated in them. It would be a gift of the resurrection to others if our actions matched our words about our belief in the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Thomas was looking for actions to match the words of his fellow disciples' experience of the Risen Lord.

Thomas had to wait a week after Jesus' first appearance for his unbelief to become belief. It must have been a long week because I suspect the disciples spent some very frustrating time trying to convince Thomas that the Lord had indeed been raised from the dead. The disciples probably did not realize it then, but it gave them practice on how to convince people who would never see the risen Lord on earth, yet were asked to believe in him by faith. We heard Peter give his one of his best efforts to do this in the reading from Acts. By God's grace, after that long week of conversations, many arguments, and "Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'" This time Thomas was there and his unbelief was about to be turned to belief.

Jesus' appearance before Thomas was a resurrection gift to him, the other disciples and us too. It was an act of saving grace. Jesus said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not be unbelieving but believe." What an invitation, what a gift of the resurrection these words and actions of Jesus were to Thomas. "Jesus' offer of the gift of himself to Thomas evokes the most powerful and complete confession of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: 'My Lord and my God!' In confessing Jesus as his Lord and God, Thomas acknowledged

the truth of the words that Jesus previously spoke to him: 'If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him'; 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.'" In the end, "it is not touching Jesus that leads Thomas to this confession of faith, but Jesus' gracious offer of himself." Yes, Thomas was indeed proclaiming Jesus as his Lord and God. The gift of faith had been set free in him by the words and action of Jesus. It is an offer of himself he makes to us today so that we too might believe in him. TNIBC, Vol. IX, pg. 850

Then 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. The blessing Jesus said would come to those of us "who have not seen and yet have come to believe" is the gift of faith. This gift of faith is well defined in Hebrews11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We owe a debt of thanks to Thomas for triggering the response his struggle to believe brought out of Jesus. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

This gift of faith and Jesus' reply to Thomas are also a gift of encouragement and hope to us. These same gifts of faith, hope and encouragement were also shared with the persecuted first century Christians to whom Peter wrote. As a witness to the physical resurrection of Jesus and what Jesus told Thomas, he assured those frightened people: "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your whole being." Two thousand years later, we cannot ask for better words of faith, hope and encouragement in Jesus Christ than these.

Faith in Jesus Christ is also the result of another gift of the resurrection, the Holy Spirit, which Jesus breathed upon the disciples the first time he appeared to them. It is the Holy Spirit that gifts us with faith and helps to enliven it in us to realize that; in the Spirit, Jesus Christ stands before us as he did Thomas; and invites us to change from unbelieving to believing by confessing him as Lord and God. I like how Paul expresses this in Romans 10:8-10: "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved."

From these gifts of saving grace and of the resurrection comes another gift from the Risen Lord—forgiveness. This forgiveness is one of the major reasons why Jesus died on the cross in the first place. This forgiveness is why we celebrate communion. In the Lord's Supper we remember Jesus' words about his sacrifice for our forgiveness: "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Yes, Jesus shed his blood and gave his body on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

Jesus then passed on to the disciples and the rest of the church this responsibility of forgiving people of their sins and assuring them of pardon by declaring: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." This forgiveness of sins is not cheap

grace for the power of sin was conquered by Jesus' sacrifice upon the cross. The proof of this victory was God raising him from the dead. As the members of the body of Christ we are to share this good news so that others might repent of their sins as we have, accept the gift of forgiveness as we have and accept Jesus' invitation to reach out to touch him and confess him as Lord and God, as we have.

We take this responsibility of the forgiveness of sins seriously as Presbyterians as do other Christian churches. We demonstrate it when someone is baptized and/or joins the church as we ask this question on sin: "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" Almost every Sunday we have a confession of sin and assurance of pardon in the worship service. We pray the Lord's Prayer almost every Sunday and in it we ask God to "forgive us our debts, **as** we forgive our debtors." It means that we have first forgiven the sins of those who have sinned against us before we ask God for forgiveness. As you can see this forgiveness of sins is not cheap grace. We believe it can lead to a confession of faith in Jesus as Lord and God. We offer this opportunity every Sunday in the confession of faith from one of the creeds; and in the litanies of baptism and joining the church. As you can see, we, the Presbyterian Church as well as other Christian churches take this forgiveness of sin responsibility given to us by Jesus very seriously.

We are also to take seriously holding people responsible for their sins, "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Sins are retained if a person refuses to receive Christ's forgiveness of sins. To refuse this gift of forgiveness is to spit in the face of Jesus as the soldiers did when they beat him. It is a denial of Christ's gifts of grace and salvation at the risk of one's own permanent demise. Refusing can be a sinners' choice and it leaves them separated from God and the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Jesus pointed this out several times in his preaching and encounters with the Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes who resisted his love, grace and forgiveness and refused to face their sinful attitudes and ways. Despite the resistance we might encounter, we are to seriously take holding ourselves and other people responsible for sins committed.

Yet, most of our efforts are to be placed in living out the peace, love, grace and forgiveness we have found by confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and God; and inviting others to let go of their sinful lives and to surrender to Jesus Christ who also gifts them as he has gifted us with the Holy Spirit, faith in him, forgiveness of sins, the certain hope of the same resurrection he experienced and his peace.

These are not the only gifts Jesus Christ gives us in the resurrection, just the vital ones lifted up in today's scripture lesson from John. And again, "Ours is a visually oriented society" so we must not just hear of these gifts or just speak of them; we must live them so that our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is eye-catching and real. We do not have to show these gifts on some jumbotron, but in our everyday lives with our families, our friends, our colleagues, our classmates, strangers, and especially with our enemies. As hard as it may be at times, remember the same gift of peace Jesus gave to the once fear-filled disciples is with us. May the grace and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.