

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

April 11, 2010

Rev. Roger Rapp

Worship Theme: When it's Hard to Believe

John 20: 19-31

Some of you may remember the hymn "Were You There" that we sung on Good Friday.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord,

Were you there when they crucified my Lord,

Oh! Sometimes it causes me to to tremble, tremble,

tremble. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

As you know the song progresses through each stage of the crucifixion....Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?, Were you there when they pierced Him in the side?, Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb? In many hymnals, including our hymnal in the pew racks, that's where the song ends. Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb. The place to end the song...on Good Friday.

But there is another verse in some hymnals which is,
Were you there when God raised Him from the tomb?

Living the Easter victory, as we are still in the Easter season,
we live and bear witness to the power of the resurrection as
followers of Christ in our present day.

I remember years ago, my campus pastor responding to a
question by a student who wondered about the historical
significance of the resurrection. The question was
something like “So if Jesus was raised from the dead, so
what?. Why should I believe it? Why should anyone believe
it? We weren’t there?” This was a good question. The
campus pastor recognized that the question was
understandable, he then went on to say this: “The
resurrection wasn’t just about Jesus being raised from the
dead. The resurrection was also an experience that
happened in the lives of the followers of Jesus.”

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus, of course appears to
the disciples, when they were locked behind closed doors,
fearful, dazed, and devastated. We know that Jesus then
appears to them with the words, “Peace be with you.” Then
he shows them his hands and his side where his body was

pierced by the soldiers. Then, he gives them the Holy Spirit, and commissions them to bear witness to his life and resurrection, and to live with the grace and peace of his presence in their lives from that point on. When I think of that scene, I am reminded of the beginning of our worship today when we hear the pastor say “The Grace and Peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, be with you all.”

All of this is fine, but still, as we make our way through our baptismal journey, what do we do when it’s hard to believe? What do we do when we see and experience the sadness, the suffering, and the evil that is ever present in the world, and in our lives? What do we do when it’s hard to believe? That’s the question we have from Thomas today, as he just doesn’t believe it. Yes, he’s heard it from the others, but he won’t believe it until he has seen the evidence.

Of course, as we know from the reading today, Jesus appears again, reaches out to Thomas, then, as he did the first time, shows Thomas his wounds. After Thomas comes to faith, these words come from the mouth of Jesus, words not just for Thomas, but for all who struggle with those times when it is just plain hard to believe: “Have you

believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

What strikes me in today’s Gospel is that God reassures Thomas while the faithful are gathered together. He does not just meet with Thomas privately. He does not reprimand Thomas for not believing the others. He simply, and graciously, goes through the same song, adding another verse. He is reassuring and loving. He recognizes why Thomas finds it hard to believe. It’s as if this second appearance is recorded in John, not just for Thomas, but for all of us, when we find it hard to believe.

There are times when our faith is challenged by our experiences. For example, H. George Anderson, a former bishop of the Lutheran church, recalls the time when his wife died while he was the president of Luther College. After her death, he was grieving and felt devastated by the emptiness in his life. He always went to daily chapel at the college, not just to set an example, but because he really enjoyed going to worship, and singing the hymns. After his wife’s death, he still went to daily chapel. But he couldn’t sing the hymns. It was too emotional. But, as he said later, “I could not sing, but I was carried, in my grief, by the singing

of the congregation.” Going to chapel was one way of dealing with his loss, and the community of faith helped him to “keep the faith.”

I think all of us can identify with our friend that we call “Doubting Thomas”. And I think it is important to share how, from time to time, God meets us in our daily lives, almost as if it is Jesus himself that is addressing us in our doubts, and reminds us that we are not alone in our doubts.

A few weeks ago, I walked over to St. Mary’s cathedral, and sat in the back pew for a few minutes. I was curious about the remodeling, but I was also wondering about a lot of things that were troublesome to me and were challenging my faith. The big cathedral was empty, and as I sat there, wondering and contemplating how hard it is to believe, I heard someone come in behind me. Then, a young boy, probably about 12 or 13, walked part way up the aisle, briefly placed himself, prostrate, on the floor, then slipped into a pew, knelt and crossed himself, and was obviously saying some prayers. He wasn’t particularly emotional, just kneeling there, in prayer. This touched me deeply, and tears welled up in my eyes at the simple sight of this young lad, pausing in his day to pray in the cathedral. It was as if

Jesus visited me in that moment, through this young witness...I felt a peace and a reassurance that more than made up for my doubts of the moment.

Perhaps you have had moments when Jesus, like he did to Thomas, visits us with an angel, or a simple experience that says, "Do not doubt, but believe."

When we recite the creed in worship, as we will in a few moments, it is not only a personal profession of faith, but a witness of our faith to those who are gathered around us.

What is it like being present with others who profess their faith help you to believe? Believing in Christ is not only a solitary experience, even though it is sometimes. But there are times when we need each other. In our reaching out to others, we can invite them to worship with us. And as we join our voices together in song, or in prayer, or in saying the creed, we hear again the voice of Jesus, as he said to Thomas, and to us, "Do not doubt, but believe."

Amen...and Amen