

**“Ready to Testify?”**

**New London UMC**

**Sunday, April 11, 2021**

**John 20:19-31; Acts 4:32-35; I John 1:1—2:2 NRSV**

**Rev. Joyce Rich**

Today’s scripture readings touch on topics often near and dear to our hearts, that we are well-versed in: fear; stubborn resistance; possessiveness; need; lies; and sin.

Today’s scripture readings also speak of things we might be a little hazy on, such as: peace; receiving the Holy Spirit; unity of belief; forgiveness; and the joy of fellowship.

Somehow today’s scripture readings are *both* too familiar and too out of reach for us. For example, how is it that we can easily relate to disciples whose fear keeps them behind locked doors – even *AFTER* most of them have already seen the risen Christ; while we find ourselves struggling to understand how some believers were willingly able to sell off property so the proceeds could be distributed and other believers would not be in need? Why does it seem like the fear we have about maintaining our own safety, along with our fear of not having ‘enough,’ continue to drive our decision making and our discipleship? Why do our fears seem to have more influence over how we live our lives than the “good news” that Jesus was raised from death and has given us peace, the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, and eternal life? . . . To let fear control us seems so wrong, doesn’t it?

Almost as wrong as the disciples *still* being behind closed, locked doors a week after Jesus came and stood among them – and they had rejoiced that he was raised from the dead! Why were they still there? Was it because Thomas didn’t believe them when they told him about Jesus? And if Thomas wouldn’t listen to them – who would? . . . Thomas wasn’t there when Jesus came to see them. And Thomas stubbornly refused to believe them when they told him that Jesus showed them his hands and his side, and told them that he was sending them with the Holy Spirit to forgive sins. That was all too much for Thomas to believe. He couldn’t listen to it. Unless Thomas could see *for himself* the mark of the nails in Jesus’ hands, and put *his own finger* there – and *his hand* in the wound in Jesus’ side – *he would not believe* that Jesus was raised from the dead. It didn’t matter that almost a dozen people that Thomas knew well, lived with, and *generally trusted* kept telling him that they had seen the Lord, he would not believe them. . . . So what were his friends supposed to do? Jesus had wanted them to go out and carry on his work – but was it safe to do that right NOW? Were they supposed to go without Thomas? Or were they supposed to convince Thomas to come with them? What did Jesus expect them to do? Maybe they should stay here for now. Just keep the door shut and locked.

But then Jesus just showed up once again – despite the closed and locked door – and Jesus reached out to Thomas and said, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put in in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” . . . *Now* it wasn’t someone

else's experience of seeing the Lord – it was Thomas' experience – and he said, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas actually *didn't need* to touch the wounds on Jesus' hand or side, but he *did need* to see Jesus for himself. He *did need* to have his own experience of being with the risen Christ. He *did need* what all the other disciples had already been able to experience themselves. . . . But the other disciples *hadn't trusted* their experience *enough* to unlock the door and go out and share what they knew, what they had experienced, with other people – because Thomas hadn't believed them until he saw Jesus for himself. . . . Would they now be able to boldly go out *with* Thomas and share what they knew, what they had experienced, so that others might come to believe in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing they, too, could experience new life in his name? Would their love for Jesus and their desire to share this good news now be *greater* than their fear that no one would believe them – or even greater than their fear that the authorities would also arrest them, and crucify them?

This feels like a tipping point, doesn't it? Jesus' disciples already knew what it was like to slide back into their fear – but they really wanted to know what it would be like to be sent out with the Holy Spirit, with Jesus' blessing and peace, to share the good news. In Acts we read how they were able to come together with others who believed and "were of one heart and soul" as they shared their lives and "their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," so that "great grace was upon them all." That unity of belief, that pulling together of support for each other and sharing of a common purpose – well, it can sound pretty amazing to us. *So amazing* that we tend not to believe it – because this sounds like a *hyper ideal* community of believers – but we know that these people were still human, they weren't perfect, they wouldn't have been able to sustain this way of living together because each and every one of them couldn't have made the best choice, the most loving choice, the unselfish choice every second of every day. They were still going to sin. They were going to fall short of the ideal. . . . I think we're pretty clear how that happens. That despite our best intentions, despite what we believe, despite our love for Jesus and our desire to love others as we love ourselves – we still sin.

But what we are reminded of in the First Letter of John is that we can confess our sins, we can be forgiven and cleansed from our sins, and that Jesus Christ enables us to join back together with each other in fellowship with one another and with God. We can't lie and say it's not possible to know the joy of forgiveness and restored fellowship. Because if we say that's not possible – then we deny the power that raised Jesus from the dead, and we deny the love that God has for all God's children and all of God's creation. The message we've been given, that we know is true, is that God loves us so much that God sent the Son not to condemn us – but to be our advocate and the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and for the sins of the world. That's what we're here to testify to.

Amen.