**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC April 12, 2015**

***Go in Peace***

**A Sermon for Eastertide by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to worship at West Center Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, on this Second Sunday of Easter. We are now in the Church Season of Eastertide. Eastertide is the forty days between Easter and Ascension Day, which is May 14th this year. The liturgical color will be white until the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, on May 24th.

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** John 20:19-31

Our Gospel Witness for today speaks of Jesus appearing to his closest followers, both women and men, on two occasions: the evening of Easter Day and the Sunday after Easter.

**SERMON**

Even though the first followers of Jesus were overjoyed by the news that their Lord had risen from the dead, they were still afraid. They were afraid for their own futures, afraid for their own lives. Would the authorities be coming for them as they came for Jesus, just a few days earlier?

And so the men and women lock the doors and shutter the windows of the house where they have been meeting since their arrival in Jerusalem. They lock the doors, shutter the windows and wonder what to do next.

Suddenly Jesus comes and stands among them, not having knocked on the door nor rapped on a window!

Jesus appears out of nowhere to be among them once more. Jesus doesn’t have a dramatic proclamation to make, such as “I am risen!”

Instead, Jesus says the simple Sabbath greeting, “Peace be with you,” which in Hebrew is “Shalom.” Shalom. Peace be with you.

After greeting his followers, Jesus shows them his hands and side, which bear witness to his crucifixion. The people rejoice that Jesus is alive and with them.

Jesus repeats his initial greeting, “Peace be with you.” But this time Jesus goes beyond his greeting. Jesus has something for his followers to do. Jesus says to his followers and to us, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

And what Jesus means is this: ‘I send you to teach and live the Good News of God’s forgiving love to all the world.’

“When Jesus had said this, he breathes on them (as God had breathed the breath of life into Adam), saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

In other words Jesus is saying, ‘I am not sending you out alone into the world, but with the Holy Spirit -- to guide and comfort you.’

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”

With this act of apostolic succession, Jesus is enabling his apostles, both women and men, to offer what he had offered, the forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace.

Jesus’ act of apostolic succession is why at West Center Church we have a Prayer of Confession and Unison Words of Affirmation each Sunday.

We all need forgiveness, and “If we forgive the sins of any, their sins are forgiven them.”

Everything is going well with Jesus’ visit to his followers that first Easter evening. There’s only one small, but not insurmountable problem.

Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not present when Jesus arrived. And when the followers later tell Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!” Thomas replies, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark on the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Thomas, Doubting Thomas, needs proof. And he wants more than visible proof that Jesus has returned. Thomas wants tactile proof. Thomas wants to put his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in the wound on Jesus’ side, or Thomas says he will not believe.

And the fact that Thomas and his doubts are included in the post-resurrection story of Jesus appearance is a great gift, a great gift to us. The story of Doubting Thomas tells us that doubt is legitimate, that doubt has a place in our faith, that we move in many different directions, and that moving from doubt to faith is one of them.

We may also move from faith to doubt and back again to faith. Each of our lives and spiritual journeys takes their own direction. We just have to be honest with ourselves and keep moving to arrive wherever it is that we are destined to go.

It’s clear that Jesus cares about Thomas. Jesus doesn’t complain about Thomas’ lack of faith, nor does Jesus forget about him. The Sunday after Jesus’ Easter evening appearance, Thomas is home with the others when Jesus arrives.

“Although the doors were again shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then Jesus said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach our your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’”

“Thomas answered Jesus, ‘My Lord and my God!’”

And although in some great works of art, such as the painting “Doubting Thomas” by Caravaggio, you see Thomas actually touching Jesus’ wounded side, the Gospel story itself does not say that Thomas now needed the tactile proof that he had demanded earlier.

Just looking at Jesus and listening to Jesus is clearly enough for Thomas. Thomas immediately knows who Jesus is. Jesus is both Lord and God. Thomas is Doubting Thomas no longer. Thomas has become Believing Thomas, Following Thomas, Preaching Thomas, Forgiving Thomas Loving Thomas.

Jesus knows that Thomas believes because Thomas has seen Jesus with his own eyes. But of course not everyone will have the experience of seeing the resurrected Jesus, so Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

In other words, like Thomas, we too are blessed. We have not seen Jesus walking through the door, and yet somehow through the stories about him that we have heard, and the experiences we have had in the church and in our personal lives, we have come to believe that Jesus is the Lord, the Son of God. Jesus has walked through our door and into our lives.

Or some of us might say, I am coming to believe that Jesus is the Lord, the Son of God. I am coming to believe in Jesus as I read, think, and pray; as I experience forgiveness; as I give and receive love in ways great and small.

Personal belief is more of a journey than a destination. The process of finding our faith is the product. We may be firm of faith in our youth, later experience times of doubt and questioning, and eventually rise again --- with the hope born of Easter morning.

And if we are ever feeling hopeless, I suggest that we look into the face of baby Karina Lucia Arroyo-Valentin, to see hope incarnate, hope made flesh. By looking into the face of this newly born child and all newly born children, we know God’s love for the world is real and present among us. And we know that God's desire is for peace on earth good, good will toward all.

Peace be with you. Shalom. Amen.

**West Center Congregational Church**

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