

“I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY!”

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

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Theologians may argue about what happened on that first Easter morning, but historians are clear about one thing: Easter changed the world; at least it changed the world of Jesus' disciples. From a frightened group of followers whom Mark tells us “*all deserted him and fled,*” (Mark 14:50) at the time of Jesus' arrest and trial, to the bold and courageous group of witnesses that were willing to suffer and die to tell the story, **something happened! Something changed!** It is not only clear from the Gospel record, but from the writings of secular historians of the time, that Easter turned the world upside down. Reports of the resurrection of Jesus may have had little impact on the Roman government or even on the Jewish religious leaders on that first Easter Sunday, but within a few years the climate changed dramatically. Those who had betrayed and denied Jesus were now willing to suffer persecution and even death because of their faith. Within a generation, Christianity spread throughout the Near East to the coasts of Africa and Europe. Within three hundred years, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, and eventually the message of Jesus was shared on every continent and every country on earth.

What happened? While, I repeat, scholars may differ as to the interpretation of biblical texts, it is clear that **the disciples encountered the risen Christ, and he changed their lives.** Now describing that encounter and the impact of the risen Christ has always been a challenge for believers. John tells us that even though the frightened followers of Jesus were meeting behind closed doors in a locked room, the power of the resurrected Christ was so strong; he came through those locked doors to be with his disciples! Once they met the risen Christ, the disciples could not be restrained. The Jewish authorities rightly feared that the delicate balance they had worked out with Rome would be upset if this renegade group of fanatics got too carried away. The authorities threatened to put the disciples in jail in order to keep the peace with Rome. Peter, whom you will remember had not long ago denied Jesus three times, now, as the spokesperson for the group, speaks boldly, “***We must obey God rather than any human authority.***” (Acts 5:29) Then he tells the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus, proclaiming that the disciples are witnesses to all that has happened.

It is pretty clear from the Gospel record that all who encounter Christ are called to witness to his resurrection and his transforming power. When Jesus appears to the disciples on that first Easter evening, he does not come just to socialize, although the disciples are thrilled to see him. He comes with a purpose in mind: to commission the disciples for service. “*As the Father has sent me, so I send you,*” Jesus proclaims (John 20:21). He continues, “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any,*

they are retained.” In other words, Jesus’ disciples, Jesus’ followers, are called to be the continuing presence of Christ in the world. They are to continue to do what Jesus did in and for the world.

Now the Bible tells us that Thomas was not at that first meeting. We don’t know why Thomas was not there, but for whatever reason, Thomas was not present when Christ appeared to the disciples on that first Easter evening. “We had the most amazing experience last night, Thomas,” one of the disciples probably said. “We were all praying, when Jesus came and stood in our midst. Not only did we experience his presence, Jesus commissioned us for service in the world. He told us to go out and tell the story of his death and resurrection.”

Thomas, being a normal, regular guy that had seen Jesus’ lifeless body hanging on the cross just a few days before, said what you and I probably would have said, “*Jesus? Here? No way! I saw him die. I watched as they sealed the tomb. It must have been somebody that looked like Jesus and reminded you of Jesus. There’s no way Jesus was here with you.*” When the disciples insisted that they had encountered the risen Christ, Thomas finally said, “*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.*”

Throughout Christian history, Thomas has always gotten a bad rap. “Doubting Thomas” we call him. He is the example of what we shouldn’t be. Yet I have always had a great deal of admiration for Thomas, for Thomas would not accept second-hand faith. Thomas insisted on encountering the risen Christ for himself. After all, when he said, “*I will not believe until I see for myself,*” Thomas was not asking for any special treatment. The other disciples had seen Jesus. Thomas wanted to see him as well. Thomas needed a resurrection experience of his own. Don’t we all?!

Father Basil Pennington, a Roman Catholic monk, talks of an encounter he once had with a teacher of Zen. Pennington was at a retreat. As part of the retreat, each person met privately with this Zen teacher. Pennington says that at that meeting, the Zen teacher said, “I like Christianity. But I would not like Christianity without the resurrection. I want to see your resurrection!”

Pennington notes that with his directness, the Zen teacher was saying what everyone else implicitly says to Christians: “You are a Christian. You have been raised with Christ. Show me what this means in your life, and I will believe.” That’s how people know if the resurrection is true or not. Does it affect how we live?

The amazing thing is that every one of Jesus’ disciples passed the test, including Thomas. Once he had seen Jesus, Thomas’ life was dramatically turned upside down by that encounter, just like all the rest. Like the other disciples, once Thomas had encountered the risen Jesus he felt compelled to tell the story, even if it meant suffering and death.

We believe that Jesus not only encountered the disciples in that locked room on Easter Sunday and again the next week when Thomas was present, but that Christ has continued to make himself known to people through the years, and continues to encounter people today. There is a song we sometimes sing at camp that I believe with all my heart. It goes like this, “*Have you seen Jesus, my Lord? He’s here in plain view. Take a look, open your eyes. He’ll show life to you.*”

This morning I have asked three of our youth to share a word about their encounter with Jesus. I asked them to tell us, “**How has Jesus Christ changed your life?**” Each of them expressed reservations and hesitations, which is normal and healthy. Not just Thomas, but all of us have doubts. All of us hesitate to share our story, for none of us see ourselves as model

Christians. But these young folks have encountered, or should I say, they have been encountered by Jesus Christ on the road of life. I want them to share a word with you.

Hi. I'm Gina Joy Evangelista. I grew up in this church. I did all the routine things - Sunday School, choir, bells, youth group - and the list goes on and on. I learned all the Bible stories and worship songs at a young age. But I didn't really know Jesus Christ until about a year ago, when I went on my Chrysalis flight. On that weekend, I was overwhelmed by His love for me, and for all of us. It wasn't just something I heard a pastor talk about on Sunday anymore, or the lyrics to a song, sung without any thought to their meaning. This love is burning and passionate! It is REAL! A love so strong that a King would die innocently, and a King so strong that He can overcome even death! In this past year, I've realized that Christ is so much more powerful that all the darkness that any of us can face. I realized that He can, and has, overcome the depression that I've faced for years. I thought I was going through everything alone and unloved, but my Father was there all along, loving me when I didn't even realize it. Now the depression cannot keep a hold on me or keep my down any longer because I know the truth and I know Jesus Christ. Jesus conquered death and I know that through Him, I, too, can do and overcome all things. 30:11 says, "You turned my sorrow into dancing, You took my sackcloth and clothed me in JOY!" He has given me a heart ready to dance for Him and has fully clothed me in joy. And that has completely changed my life.

Now, I ask, how has Easter changed you? I dare say, none of us has arrived. None of us can say with confidence that we have it all together and have the faith all figured out. But have you let the risen Christ come through the locked doors of your life and stand with you where you live? That is the question we need to ask ourselves. Is Jesus as real to you as he was to Thomas and the other disciples? It is clear from the biblical text in John that the faith of those of us who were not in that upper room on the first Easter Sunday night is just as valid as the faith of those who were eyewitnesses. **Have you seen Jesus my Lord? He's here in plain view.**

There is no more convincing testimony than a firsthand witness. When the disciples told their story, it electrified the world. Our job, once we have been encountered by the risen Christ, is to tell the story. I'm so proud of Mark, Gina, and Melanie for telling their stories. It speaks to me in a way that books and second-hand stories never will. It causes me to think about my own encounter with Christ, and it reminds me that each of us has a story to tell.

In the days of the early church, people by the thousands became Christians because they saw the disciples' commitment to Christ. They were devoted to the church, with good reason. There is no institution in the world that serves people better than the church does. There is no institution that helps families more than the church does. There is no institution in the world that redeems lives like the church. There is no institution in the world that teaches love like the church. There is no institution in the world that lifts God up and inspires righteousness like the church does. There is no institution in the world that cultivates goodness like the church does.

It bothers me, quite frankly, when I hear about declining numbers in many congregations and read about the closing of churches. The church in our day should be growing in numbers, not shrinking! I want to say that the decline of the church in our time is not because of circumstances. It is because of our failure as Christians to challenge those circumstances. Industries and enterprises in the world around us may downsize or go bankrupt because there is less need for their product, but the need for what we have to offer is greater than ever. Who

could say that loneliness, fear, anxiety and sin are less an issue now than they were in previous generations? Was the church ever needed more than it is today?

But I am not here to promote the institutional church this morning, even though I love the church and think it is vitally important that we tell the church's story. I'm here to tell you about Jesus Christ! The world is starving to death for Jesus, and he's here in plain view! We are here to share Jesus Christ with a needy world, and everything we do must be for that purpose. We have worship services and Sunday school classes, Bible study groups and enrichment groups. We have youth groups, children's groups, Kids Club, and mission work groups. We take trips, build Habitat houses, provide a place for the homeless to stay, put on skits, play games and present musical concerts. We build clinics, feed the hungry, and collect shoes and boots for the needy, all for one purpose --- so that we can share the love of Christ; so that we can tell people about Jesus.

The first disciples were so moved by their encounter with Jesus, so passionate about his transforming power, so filled with conviction about his message, that they were willing to risk everything to tell the story of Jesus and his love. What about you? What about me? How has Easter changed us? What kind of witnesses are we? Will you let the message of Easter turn your life upside down? Will you be a witness for Jesus? Will you tell the story?

Prayer: Dear God, give us confidence so that into the silence of fear, we can speak truth; into the pain of vengeance, we can proclaim forgiveness; into the turmoil of anger, we can sing mercy; into the burden of oppression, we can declare justice; into the hopelessness of despair, we can whisper compassion; into the disintegration of death, we can shout love. Into a broken world, send us as witnesses of wholeness. Into an apathetic world, send us as witnesses of hope. Into a famished world, starved for love, send us as witnesses to the abundance of your grace. We pray this prayer in the name of the resurrected Christ, who changes everything. Amen.