

April 23, 2017  
The Second Sunday of Easter

**“Happy Easter”**  
*by Mary Anne Biggs*

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 ~ John 20:19-31

Some of you may laugh ... some of you may not believe it ... some of you may think I've gone totally off my nut ... but this is Easter Sunday! It's Easter every Sunday at the First Congregational UCC in Eagle River and at other churches, too. That's what John is trying to tell us today. It's the not so subtle subtext of his story about "doubting Thomas," ... one of those messages that's all the more powerful because we "overhear" it while listening to John tell us about Thomas.

But let's look at the story again. The disciples gather in a room behind closed doors on the first day of the week. Suddenly, mysteriously, Jesus is with them. "Peace be with you," he says. You can almost hear the disciples responding, "And also with you." Then Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then Jesus breathes on them ... he is breathing! ... and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is John's version of Pentecost.

Yes, it's a story about Easter. But it's also a story of how every Sunday is Easter, because this is what happens every time his disciples gather ... Jesus is with us ... Jesus gives us peace ... Jesus commissions us ... and then Jesus empowers us to go back out into the world to do his work. We call that "church!"

Look what happens exactly one week later. It's Sunday again, a week after Easter. The disciples gather again behind closed doors. And again, Jesus is with them. He reaches out his wounded hands to heal Thomas' wounded spirit. See what I mean? ... Easter every Sunday. John wants us to know that this happens every week among Jesus' closest friends. It's still Easter, you see, because Jesus is here, living and breathing among us. It does happen every Sunday. I can't explain it. But we *know* he is here. We can *feel* him. We can *see* him in each other.

Look around you. We are all so different. We're a lot like the original disciples for sheer diversity. We've got life-long Democrats and life-long Republicans. We've got people with children and people with no children ... people with partners and people with no partners ... people who grew up in the city and "folks" who grew up in the country. We've got big people and little people ... middle class and lower class ... and lower upper middle class ... and middle upper lower class ... and a few with no class at all. And we're a messy, complicated lot. From top to bottom and side to side we would make a fine study for an anthropologist. Even for our small size, we are a human zoo. We are a hodge-podge. And the one thing that holds us together is the risen Christ in our midst.

How do we know that it is Jesus and that we're not just self-deceived? By one thing ... because of the way we treat the Thomases among us. And I suppose at one time or another ... or maybe from time to time ... we are all Thomas. His Greek name was Didymus, which means "twin," Did he actually have a twin ... or was that nickname metaphorical because he embodied so

clearly a dual nature ... the divided mind ... the inner battle we all share as a part of the human condition? Or maybe he's called the twin because he is our twin. He is one of us ... our kind ... our mirror image, if you will.

We have nicknamed him "doubting Thomas," and so he is. But we might just as well call him "cynical Thomas." Remember just a few short weeks ago, when Jesus decided to go on down to Bethany when Lazarus had died, even though he was heading into clear danger so near to Jerusalem, it was Thomas who said, "*Well, we might as well go die with him!*" (John 11:16). Or we could call him "practical Thomas." When Jesus got a little too metaphysical and esoteric in his preaching, Thomas brought him down to earth and asked him to state it plain and simple. Remember when Jesus said,

*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.*

It was Thomas who said to him, "Lord, what in the Sam Hill are you talking about? He actually said, "*We don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?*" So Jesus said, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:1-6). Plain and simple. I think we would all have liked Thomas, though he could be a pain sometimes. But he had a way of saying what everybody was thinking but no one had the courage to say.

But in his "title" story, doubting Thomas shows us the complexity of doubt. It's not just one emotion, but many. To be sure, doubt is cognitive. Thomas confronts something here that isn't in the orbit of his ordinary human experience. But Thomas doesn't only doubt because it offends his scientific sensibility to the cause and effect nexus of the laws of geophysics. Thomas' doubt is also about his isolation. The rest of his friends are buzzing about this powerful experience, but he is left out. Where was Thomas last Sunday? Well, for one thing he didn't know it was Easter. Maybe he stayed out too late on Saturday night or maybe it was raining. Maybe he decided to sleep in or just didn't feel like getting dressed so he missed God's greatest triumph! And you can bet your life I'm, not going to let this opportunity pass without saying, "You see what happens? You see what happens when you miss a single Sunday?" But just imagine how he felt...left out ... and you can imagine that he felt that way a lot because of his habit of asking the hard questions that nobody else wanted to ask.

Thomas probably had some guilt behind his doubt, too, because he *wasn't* there when he should have been. Or maybe he felt rejected ... even unworthy since Jesus *didn't* wait to appear until he was there. Maybe Thomas felt some fear ... because if it's true ... everything will change ... and he will have to change ... and more may be required of him than he feels capable of giving. So you see, Thomas' doubt isn't all cognitive ... not even mostly cognitive. It's emotional and relational and spiritual. As Kahlil Gibran observed, "*Doubt is pain ... too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother.*"

Faith always stands in tension with doubt. Doubt will always challenge faith to move to a deeper and more honest level. We need *both* doubt and faith. We need both within us. And we need *both* among us. But most people don't want to hear doubt when they're feeling faith. They don't want to ask the questions if the answers are too hard. They don't want to be honest about their

own wounds and sorrows and deep dark side. They keep it pushed down and ignore it ... they stay on the surface of things because they lack the courage to deal with the reality that life is messy ... and that God is a mystery ... and that things just don't always go the way we expect. A lot of the baptized are that way ... and beware if you try to ask them about their own pain and struggles and questions ... because often they will blame you for asking. They will say things like, "I have a simple faith." But I don't believe that faith is simple at all ... I think it is complicated and difficult and almost impossible at times.

But whatever we call Thomas, let us also call him "faithful Thomas," because in spite of his cynicism ... in spite of his doubts ... in spite of his anger and sorrow and pain ... he *did* show up the next Sunday. He stayed with it. He came back. If he hadn't, he would never have found peace for his disturbed spirit. Because by staying, there is possibility for healing. Whatever we may call Thomas, let us also call him "courageous Thomas," ... because it isn't easy to stick in there when you feel wounded. And whatever we may call Thomas, let us also call him "honest Thomas." What does he say? "*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*" (John 20:25). He got right to the point. He saw Jesus die. So he will not believe Jesus is alive unless he sees the wounds to prove that it is the same Jesus ... and not just some demonic trick or group hallucination. And where does Jesus connect with Thomas? *Wound to wound*. Jesus connects with Thomas at the place of his pain to bring him to healing and faith. You see, we can never get help until we admit we need help. We can never find healing until we are willing to deal honestly with our wounds. There is no cover up. The risen Christ is the crucified Christ who first stands with us in *our* crucifixions before he brings us to our resurrections.

A lot of churches have a hard time putting up with the Thomases among them because they seem too negative. When everybody else is celebrating, they're saying, "Now wait just a doggone minute." So it says as much about the disciples as it does about Thomas that he is still there the next week ... and that he can feel free enough among them to voice his pain and doubt. To me, that is a sure sign that the spirit of Christ resides among them. The word "love" is never used in John's story of Thomas ... and the disciples ... and the risen Christ ... but of course, that's what it's all about. "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" ... not even our own doubts. And it's good to know that it isn't up to us ... or up to the unfailing strength of our faith. It's up to Christ ... who has faith in us even when we are struggling to believe. But the church helps us to hang in there by loving us until Jesus takes us by the hand.

In *Traveling Mercies* Ann Lamott explains why she made her son go to church:

*The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want - which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy - are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians - people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.*

And listen to the way she describes her own church:

*When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home - that it's where ... when you show up... they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, "You come back now."*

That's the kind of church we ought to be ... and I believe that's the kind of church we are!

I know the church has a lot to answer for what it's done to people in the name of Christ through the centuries. That's the dark side ... the human side of the church. The church has this dual nature, too, like every human institution. But we don't fix it by running away from it. If we did we would lose the positive side ... the life-giving ... soul-healing side of the church. And if we abandon the church, we leave nothing for the next generation. Because somewhere, somehow ... even in the midst of the institutional trappings and abuses of power ... when a small band of disciples gathers in an upper room, every Sunday ... every Sunday ... Christ is there in the midst of them ... healing their wounded spirits ... breathing new life into them ... and sending them out into the world to love again

Time won't allow me to tell the stories of all the ways I've encountered the risen Christ through you ... the members of this church. Our church is filled with countless unsung heroes who take time from their busy lives to make sure that we are Christ's hands and feet in a hurting world. Our building is well cared for and we are blessed by those who work behind the scenes to conduct the business of the church. Those are the kind of things we do day in and day out, or should I say, "Christ does through us." We don't brag about them. We probably don't even celebrate them as much as we should. We do them because we need to for the sake of our own spiritual healing and growth. So don't you see that it's Easter all over again. Easter every Sunday, in the church created and sustained by the spirit of the risen Christ.

Like many people, I have days when I don't know if my life means anything. There are a million people who could do what I do, at least as well and probably better. I don't feel that significant, but I know this much. I am part of a community that is significant. I am a member of a people ... who here and there ... and now and then ... through all our human quirks and foibles ... in spite of all our human faults and sins ... reveal the presence of the loving God in breathtaking, beautiful ways. And this church, this beloved community, makes a difference. It matters. Christ has reached out his nail scarred hands to so many souls here through you. And I feel privileged to be a part of it.

For many of you, that's why you're here week after week after week. Christ meets you here as we journey with one another. But I suppose there are some Thomases here today too. You don't quite get it. It's not happening for you. Well, that's okay. We're glad you're here. We're sorry for whatever adversities in life may have put you in that Thomas frame of mind. And we only want to say, you come back now. Keep showing up. Don't give up, because it's Easter today and Easter next week and Easter every Sunday at First Congregational United Church of Christ. If you stick with it, and keep coming, sooner or later, like Thomas, it will be Easter for you, too.

May we pray?

Almighty God, please understand. We do not doubt your power to do whatever, but we doubt that you could love us that much ... that you would include us in your plans ... that you would hear our prayers and heal our hurts. Risen Savior, we believe; help our unbelief. Come among us here again today, and if we cannot take your hand and hug your side, then let us take the hand and hug the side of one of your disciples, who also has been wounded but healed by God. Refreshing Spirit, renew us again today like the wind and the rain ... that we might blossom

forth in joy and go out to be good news to all we encounter this week, until you bring us back to Easter again next Sunday, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.