

SERMON 'Moving On...' Rev. Jane Courtright

April 19, 2020 'Moving On...' (John 20:19-31) Rev. Jane Courtright

This Sunday, we, like most Christians in America, worship online.

Many of us are isolated at home during this frightening Covid-19 time. The fear and isolation of the disciples after the first Easter sounds vaguely familiar to us! We, too, struggle to combine the joy of Easter with the lament of death. We, too are not certain about what will happen next.

We may feel like those first women followers of Jesus. They received a brief report that Jesus has risen. But they wondered: Where was he? Where was Jesus, when they were struck with fear and amazement? We also are given reports about the Coronavirus.... brief, including numbers of infections, deaths, predictions – day after day. Still, we wonder: Where will this virus travel and invade? When will it lose its grip? When will life return to 'normal?' We have difficulty coming up with words to describe our feelings right now because we've never been through this before.

During the last couple of weeks, I have thought a lot about what Jesus' disciples would have been feeling during the time between Good Friday and Easter. After all, they'd been with Jesus for over three years. Their thoughts hung on his every word. They were with Jesus for the highs and lows, the running out of food and the having too much of it. They had shared with Jesus intimate moments of healing and touching people's lives!

AND THEN IT WAS OVER. RATHER ABRUPTLY.

Jesus is arrested, the disciples scatter. They're afraid of guilt by association. They feel despair as all their dreams and hopes that were wrapped up in Jesus disappear. They probably feel very, very, lonely.

They had left everything to be 'Jesus people,' they had really put all their eggs in one basket.

And everywhere they looked, they must have seen reminders of what had been and was no more: Mountain from where Jesus spoke, places he had healed, roads they'd walked together. All poignant reminders of the person they loved and trusted, in whom they had placed so much hope!

Like those first disciples, we are also experiencing fear and loneliness.

We miss our friends, family, church family. People are separated: medical personnel quarantined from their loved ones, marriages performed & blessed virtually, people with parents and other loved ones who are in hospice only able to see them and talk to them on a screen and many more not able to hug loved ones.

We have lost for now the familiar routine of our daily lives. That's the shape of our lives right now. But when we catch a glimpse, a glimmer of new life; when we see or hear a child, when we hear of the many who offer food, friendship and compassion to others - we can feel a flickering flame of joy! That same joy encouraged the first disciples to move on, to continue what Jesus had begun. His words could still live, his message preached, his ministry continued!

Oh, they had been afraid! They had all run away when Jesus was arrested. Although some may have watched from afar, they were sure to stay in the background. Remember, Peter denied even knowing Jesus. Things did start to turn around when Mary Magdalene and the other disciples returned from Jesus' tomb, telling them that Jesus was not in his tomb, HE WAS ALIVE!

THE OTHER DISCIPLES DIDN'T BELIEVE THIS.

THEY THOUGHT IT WAS AN IDLE TALE, REMEMBER?

Jesus appeared to them in that locked room later that night. The first words he offered them were, "Peace be with you." He then did two things: He breathed peace on them and showed them his wounds.

And THEN they believed and rejoiced.

But Thomas wasn't there. We are not told why. When he finally showed up, the other disciples tell him THEY have seen Jesus! Same message delivered to them by Mary and the other women. And Thomas gave the same reaction to them that they had given those women: skepticism.

Thomas asked for proof, ironically, he asked for the same proof Jesus had already offered the other disciples. This is not a new problem.

There has never been a time when people agreed about the facts or about who counts as an expert. The Apostles believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Others thought this was 'fake news.' And the Bible's 'doubting Thomas' demanded direct evidence.

Right now, we wonder exactly what is the evidence, the truth about the Coronavirus. Who are the experts? Who should we believe? What is 'fake news?' We are in the midst of a pandemic! It seems that the more we have at risk, the more we demand proof. Our lives, our passing the virus to others more vulnerable and the lives of many others are at risk. So, we take precautions: handwashing, sanitizing, quarantining, staying at home, maintaining 'social distancing.'

It is all so difficult and frustrating. Our lives are a series of decisions made without complete certainty. We vacillate between fact and faith. At some point, a leap of faith has to be made. Thomas made that leap of faith when his hearty statement of faith burst from his lips: "My Lord and my God!"

And so, the Easter story is 'to be continued...'. But it's not the same as when we watch a favorite video series and are left with a cliff-hanger and the words 'to be continued.' When that happens, we look to an exciting event, maybe a happy ending, in the next show or season.

But 'to be continued...' in real life is more like putting one foot in front of the other, to persevere, having the wisdom to let it be, and to live,

Believing there is more to come. As one of my favorite hymns puts it:

"unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see!"

I leave you, for now, with a moving scene from 'Fiddler on the Roof:' Tevye trudges through his shtetl, praying out loud, "Troubles, troubles. That's all you hear from me, right? But else can we simple people take our troubles to? You know, sometimes I wonder, who do YOU take your troubles to? You are very busy now. Wars, revolutions, floods, plagues, all those little things that bring your people back to you."

Tevye was right. Fear has a way of making us remember faith. And faith is not always what we are best at. Doubting Thomas was always one of my favorite disciples. He is genuine, and in many ways, reminds me of myself!

This Coronavirus reminds us to have faith. It's all we have right now, along with each other, while we play this dreadful waiting game.

I find it comforting to remember what King David wrote in Psalm 31:15:

"My life is in your hands."

AMEN.