

SERMON for April 15, 2007  
John 20:19-31

Rev. Shirley R. Funk  
Lake Edge Lutheran Church  
Madison, Wisconsin

### A Restless Peace

The excitement is over. Like the letdown of Christmas when all the wrapping paper is scooped up and the relatives have, with a sigh of relief all around, gone home, like the stupor of hot summer days when the thrill of swimming and boating have worn off, like the slog down the mountain after reaching the peak yields only shaky knees and no new vistas, these are the days after resurrection morning. Only a few lilies are left, the choirs took a well-deserved week off from rehearsal, and many wise pastors headed off to their cabins or a far-flung resort for a few days. The rest of us are here, like the disciples – although not behind locked doors, just watching this past week the unwelcome snow, huddled together thinking about the whole experience, pondering the meaning of the last intense weeks of Jesus' life and death, asking the existential *so what?* So what? What now? Where do we go from here?

My mother, like many women of her day, did a large load of ironing on a weekly basis. First of all, the wash was hung out to dry on a line, so while it might have smelled good, it had a lot more wrinkles than the dryer-dried wash of today. And secondly, the fabrics were not as carefree. Growing up, my sister and I were introduced to the skill – and, at least to my mind, the drudgery - of ironing at an early age. I don't know if boys of that era ever learned to iron, as there were none in our household. After the clothes were brought in from the clothesline, each piece was rolled up and put in a basket awaiting ironing day, which according to the nursery rhyme is Tuesday. We began our ironing education slowly, practicing on pillowcases, then graduating to tea towels, handkerchiefs, napkins, and eventually blouses and shirts. It was a long and tedious process, learning how to sprinkle just enough water on the fabric to dampen but not soak, how to apply starch, how to test the iron to see if it was hot enough, how to press long enough to smooth but not scorch, and lastly, how to carefully fold or hang the finished product. Whew! I remember one of my first forays into the world of ironing very clearly, when I asked if the iron was hot enough, my mother said it was, but I touched it anyway, just to make sure. The red mark on my hand proved her point.

If those relatively simple things of life – ironing, fishing, cooking, balancing a checkbook, driving a car, painting a room – take so much time and effort and patience to learn, what makes us think that learning about life with a resurrected Jesus should be quick and instant and easy? Yet I think we do. We look to our faith, we look to God, for quick answers to our personal struggles, for immediate responses to our self-directed prayers, for a life plan and world view that is simple to follow. But as we all know, it simply doesn't work that way.

First of all, we join with disciple Thomas, who has earned the nickname of the Doubter. He was not with the rest of the disciples on that first Easter night, when they gathered, when Jesus appeared among them. And so unlikely was it to him, when he heard the news, that he just said he wouldn't believe it until he could see it. Until he could touch it and feel it and know for sure that Jesus was present. But when he did, when he opened his eyes, when he opened his hand and touched the scarred hand and side of Jesus, he had an *Aha* moment of discovery and wonder and *Amen* affirmation of the presence of the living Lord. Most disciples are doubters. Peter had to run back to the tomb, even after the women had told him that Jesus

wasn't there, to see for himself. After demons were ousted, a paralyzed man could walk, huge loads of fish were caught, lunch served to thousands – it was then that people could see and believe. The development and history of Christianity has continued with doubters being made believers by what they saw and heard – for some things like the shroud of Turin, the music of Bach to the glory of God, the work of Mother Teresa among the poor, lepers cared for, cathedrals and hospitals and schools built in far-flung places, bodies healed and Bibles translated. In every time and place, when men and women love and serve by following Jesus to the hurting and broken and violent, where Christ's disciples bring healing and reconciliation and peace, doubters become believers. Of course, just the opposite is true as well, when the witness is clouded by human sin and narrowmindedness, by misconduct and rigid prejudice and pompous self-righteousness. The path to Jesus is a windy one, through dark and light, through moments of clarity and moments of doubt.

Episcopalian priest and college professor Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *Leaving Church*, speaks of how she came to religious faith: *If you talk to most clergy long enough, you can usually pinpoint the moment when they first received a call to ministry. Nine times out of ten, it did not come straight from God. Instead, it came from a grandmother, a father, a sick sibling, a wounded bird. Sometimes the call came with spoken words, such as 'You're good at this,' or 'I need your help badly.' Other times the words arose inside, such as, 'This needs fixing and I think I know how.'* The effort to untangle the human words from the divine seems not only futile to me but also unnecessary, since God works with what is. God uses whatever is usable in a life, both to speak and to act, and those who insist on fireworks in the sky may miss the electricity that sparks the human heart. Our plodding way of coming to faith is to keep us company with Thomas the Doubter and all the disciples, opening their eyes to the presence of the risen Christ and finally being able to say, *My Lord and my God!*

The second part of these appearances of Jesus with the disciples is that Jesus said to them, over and over again, *Peace be with you*. It's a common phrase for us now, said almost without thinking, almost as easy as breathing. In fact, the ease with which we respond has led to a number of jokes, including *You know you're a Lutheran when you watch a Star Wars movie and they say, 'May the Force be with you,' and you respond, 'and also with you.'* Jesus said *Peace be with you* to the disciples when he first appeared to them, *Peace be with you* after he had shown them the wounds of his hands and side so they would believe it was truly him, *Peace be with you* again a week later when Thomas was a part of the group and he joined them. I think it wasn't so much that they didn't believe Jesus. To see and know Jesus is not simply a matter of factual knowledge, the presence of God is not a thing to put on or take off at will, the peace of Christ is not an object to give to another. The living presence of Jesus is to be in relationship with Jesus, to live with Christ. Another Episcopalian Barbara, Barbara Crafton, said, *It seems that there are two parts to the resurrection: Jesus' rising and our response. The resurrection, which we have always said was for our sake, seems also not to happen without our response, not to be an event in history so much as an event in relationship, a condition of our living with Christ... 'What happened?' We want to know, and nobody can say. But 'How is it within me? And what can I be now, because of it?' What can we be now, because of the Resurrection? How will grace and peace transform us? Will the peace with which Jesus blessed the gathered disciples make them comfortable, calm, placid, or will it make them restless, restless to share the good news?*

Preacher James Chatham tells stories of his ministerial experience in the southern part of the United States, and relates of an event in North Carolina about fifty years ago. It seems there was a fire up in the hills, burning out the trailer home of a very poor mountain family. Everyone, the mother and three children, got out safely, but they lost every possession, however meager it was. The fire department came, and a TV crew as well, and the story continues: *The TV people have pulled one of the firemen out on the sidewalk, and they are talking about, of all things, the family Bible. The fireman is leafing through Mama's big Sunday School Bible showing how, even in a fire this hot, just the edges of the pages get singed, how you can still read it perfectly well. The reporter and the fireman marvel together. 'Do you think it's a miracle,' the reporter asks, 'that God reaches down and protects the holy book?' 'I'm sure it's a miracle,' the fireman says. 'It happens over and over. Everything else burns, but the family Bible stays in good shape.'* 'God taking care of what's holy,' the reporter suggests. It is what happens next that is holy. *The young son is sent over to Aunt Jane's, a friend of the mother's, who lives in a small home with her husband, four children, and a grandmother. Ricky explains what happened, that they got burned out and lost everything, and he asks, 'Mama wants to know if we can come up here and stay a while. Everything's pretty burned up, and we don't have much to go with right now. Lord's sake, Ricky! There's only four of you! You know you can come up here. We'll just edge over a little, and there'll be plenty of room. Granma's used to having people around; this'll make her real happy. Uncle Ben brought us some fresh things out of his garden just yesterday, and we go enough food to feed the multitude. You run back down that hill and tell your mama to come on up here whenever she's ready. And the preacher comments, Here is the miracle: not an unburned Bible, not the pages of a scorched book still readable, but a living manifestation of what is recorded in that book...*

There has indeed been a resurrection miracle, but, like for Thomas, it will take days and weeks and years for us to comprehend the enormity of new life in the presence of a living Lord. We will have to touch it and see it. And we will have to make it real, a living manifestation for all of God's children. The presence and peace of Christ is not simply for a bright Easter morning, but for all the ordinary moments which God gives us as a gift and as a miracle of grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.