

Easter Season 2017
Reflections from the Peace with Justice Commission
Theme: Hope in an anxious world

April 16, 2017 – Rev. Nick Upthall

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118: 1-2, 13-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

We begin Easter with the same expectations, but also experiencing difference. In the central story of this day, of this season, and of our faith is the surprising conundrum of expectations. The women went to the tomb in darkness expecting death. Our congregations assemble *en masse* Easter morning expecting something other than death. But can we expect life? Can we anticipate the surprise? The joyful songs that “Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!” may be still more unsettling than if Jesus would’ve stayed shut up and we could’ve gone on as usual.

There is much unusual and unsettled these days. Against our Wisconsin pairings of nature and faith, the crocuses and robins showed spring had sprung long before Jesus arrived out from the tomb. We’ve lived through 387 consecutive months of above average temperatures.

We know our politics are unusual and unsettled as our country faces issues from health care to immigration, education to regulations, energy to gender. Our very identity is addressed in tense questions: who is welcome here? How do we care for each other?

Those tensions carry into our congregations, as we strive to be reconciled and to share the peace with each other. Many of our churches face worries of decline and death, feeling like our role and voice are being diminished. Yet here are words we proclaim today, bursting from death to new life with utter abandon:

- *God shows no partiality* (Acts 10:34)
- *He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed* (Acts 10:38)
- *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.* (Psalm 118:24)
- *He is not here; for he has been raised* (Matthew 28:6)
- *You have been raised with Christ* (Colossians 3:1)
- *Why are you weeping?* (John 20:15)
- *Do not be afraid* (Matthew 28:10)
- *Alleluia!*

April 23, 2017 – Pr. Jay McDivitt

John 20:19-31

Much of this story leaps off the page and into the world in which we live.

“In the evening...doors locked... for fear...” “Unless I see... I will not believe...”

Fear and doubt – two pesky companions who so often accompany us in the darkening evenings of life. Fear of strangers, of a changed and changing world, of death. Doubt that Light can pierce the darkness, that Life’s Story can overthrow death’s crushing refrain.

“Doubting Thomas” is the patron saint of those in every age who need more than flowery optimism or vigorous self-reliance to infiltrate and overturn the repeated narratives – the dull inertia – of failed hope. Hope that “real” change is possible in a world so intractably enamored of division and disdain, self-aggrandizement and learned powerlessness. The dawning awareness that even the most hopeful among us remain mired in addiction to privileged stories, to the Way Things Are.

Huddling in fear and waiting for answers isn’t enough for Thomas. While the brothers are on lock-down, Thomas is in the “real” world, looking – perhaps – for a hope more tangible than whispered promises that may or may not have substance.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says. Blessed, indeed – but also quite rare, and their faith a bit wispy, in my experience.

“Show me the scars,” Thomas demands. A fair ask. For in the evening after The Morning After, the scars remain, everywhere. Brokenness we know – and, by grace, so does God. The scars testify to solidarity, empathy, and tangible healing – for the End defeats all endings, but it’s still going to leave a mark.

The scars of the Wounded Healer: these are enough to touch and hold onto, to believe. And they can bless us with peace.

“Peace be with you.”

Alleluia. Amen.

April 30, 2017 – Rev. Jean Dow

Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; I Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

Time is a funny thing when life has turned upside down – when hopes have been shattered, dreams have died – when it seems the worst has come to pass. Hours can seem like days; days like weeks. Perhaps it was like that for the Emmaus road travelers. It had been a long few days. Had it only been a few days? Now on their way home – bewildered, heavy-hearted – “talking and discussing” with one another – trying to sort it all out.

We may find ourselves in a similar place – two full weeks now since we first gazed into an empty tomb. Two weeks is a long time. And, really, has it made a difference – the witness of the women, the good news of resurrection? Or have we simply gone back to life-as-usual? And life-as-usual these days can seem overwhelming – even downright depressing.

It can take time for the good news to sink in. Days. Weeks. Years. It’s one of the reasons we tell these stories again and again. Because Easter is not for one day – but an experience that can change us from the inside-out, and make a difference in the way we see all our days – if we’ll let it.

We're all on the journey with Cleopas and his companion, in a way – needing to keep the story alive as we talk about it with friends who share the road. And needing to be open to the possibility – the promise, in fact – that the embodiment of the good news walks beside us. Maybe this week – maybe this year – our hearts will burn with love and recognition – and life-as-usual will never be the same.

May 7, 2017 - Rev. Ann Beaty
John 10:1-10

Jesus says that he has come so that his sheep – his followers – may have life and have it abundantly. How do we embrace this abundant life in our anxious times? Living abundantly as Jesus offers is to know God and to be known by God, to accept others and to be accepted. It is to trust that God is our Good Shepherd in all of life. In this text, Jesus comes as the gatekeeper and Good Shepherd, the one who knows his sheep – intimately and truly – and who calls us by name so that we may believe and receive the wonderful truth about God's great and victorious Easter hope and love for us.

Years ago I was introduced to the curriculum “Godly Play” by Jerome Berryman. (from Young Children and Worship by Sonja Stewart) The first lesson presented in the book introduces the concept of the Good Shepherd. In addition to the story given by the teacher, there are many “wondering” questions that allow the children to intersect with the story from their own life experience.

I wonder if the sheep have names?
I wonder if the sheep are happy in this place?
I wonder if they are scared in the places of danger?
I wonder if you have ever been scared?
I wonder if you have ever been lost and found?
I wonder where you are in the story?

As I pray with the lectionary reading for this Sunday, I wonder if there is a message of hope for our anxious times in embracing the abundant life offered in God's love through the Good Shepherd?

May 14, 2017 – Rev. Dr. D. Jonathan Grieser
Acts 7.55-60; Psalm 31.1-5; 15-16; 1 Peter 2.2-10; John 14.1-14

Let not your hearts be troubled...

I wonder about the disciples gathered around their teacher and friend on that last evening. What were they feeling, what were they fearing? Did they know the Roman authorities were closing in around them? Had their hopes that the entry to Jerusalem would usher in a new reign of God been dashed? Did they know what was about to happen?

I wonder about the community to whom the gospel writer was addressing his words some seventy years later. Was their faith shaken by the tumult around them, the increasing conflicts with emergent rabbinic Judaism and the internecine warfare with the other tiny Christian communities?

I wonder about American Christians in the twenty-first century hearing the words of this gospel in Eastertide and all of the contexts in which we hear them: the many funerals where John 14:1-6 serves as the gospel reading; words of comfort and reassurance. But then there are those other words that Jesus says just a few verses later in his response to Thomas' question: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (*John 14:6*). They, too, were meant to be words of reassurance to confused and frightened disciples but have often been used as a bludgeon against our non-Christian neighbors or as a weapon to force conversion or commitment on wavering or wondering souls. Words that were meant to be comforting have too often become words that make us anxious or fearful. Words that were meant to console have become divisive and destructive.

The key to understanding those last words of Jesus in these verses is to read them in light of the first words of the reading: "Let not your hearts be troubled." His declaration that he is the way is meant to reassure Thomas, the other disciples, and us, that we can rely on his words, his presence, his relationship with us, even in anxious and uncertain times.

May 21, 2017 – Katie Van Der Linden
John 14: 15-21

Nobody wants to be alone. I am not talking the sad American notion that validation only comes through a committed relationship. I mean in general. Even the most introverted person would rather sit on a bench and not talk with someone next to him/her than sit on a bench and not talk alone. Life was never meant to be lived alone. Adam had Eve, Naomi had Ruth, Moses had Aaron, the disciples had each other, and the list goes on. Life was meant to be lived in community.

Jesus knew his death was coming. He knew that his time would be drawing to an end and he wanted to reassure the disciples that they would not be left alone. They are never alone. God is there, Jesus and now the Spirit. This Spirit is one which comes through God. This Spirit will never desert and never disappoint.

Life is rough sometimes, but we all have people who care. We may not know people who have struggled in the same way, but if we reach out, we often find a caring and listening ear. We need to trust more and worry less. The more we trust others and share our difficulties, the closer we become and the less alone we feel. The Spirit lives and moves inside of us and for the Spirit to help us, we need to connect our Spirits with one another. Let God work by inviting God's Spirit to move you, challenge you, support you, uplift you. The Holy Spirit is God with us right now. Can you feel that Spirit? It is amazing that God loved us so much that sending Jesus was not the end. Not only do we have an example of God on earth, but we have a God that continues to surround us and uphold us every day.

Welcome the Holy Spirit in by sharing your stories, your struggles, your moments, knowing not once, were you ever on your journey alone.

May 28, 2017 - Gloria Carter, Church Women United
Acts 1:6-14; John 17:1-11

Acts 1: 6-14 brings us the account of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. The disciples have been through a difficult period as they have experienced the high hopes of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the utter despair and hopelessness of the crucifixion and death of Jesus. What looked like an ending is transformed through the Resurrection to a new beginning and new hope. Now, forty days later, they must say good-bye to Jesus as he returns to his Father. As they face an anxious, uncertain future, where will they find the hope and courage to continue their mission of witnessing to God's love? Before leaving them, Jesus promises that they will receive power through the Holy Spirit, the power they need for their work ahead. They return to Jerusalem and gather together in prayer to await the promised Holy Spirit.

We face difficult times as well...in our own lives, in our churches, in our communities. Like the disciples, we can find hope in the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit. With the presence of the Spirit, we also find hope in our community of faith as the disciples did. In John 17: 11, as Jesus prays for his disciples before his death, he prays that God will make them one. In our churches we pray that we may be one, but that unity does not always come easy. To be one in the Spirit does not mean we will always be one in thoughts and opinions. We can disagree, but we must do so with compassion. We must build relationships with one another based on love. How can we share God's love with the world if we don't share God's love with one another in our faith communities? If we can create Spirit-filled community in our church and become channels of God's love to one another, we will be channels of God's love to all God's people.

We are the hope in an anxious world that desperately needs people of compassion.