

Sermon for Sunday, April 15, 2018 - "Hope and Doubt"

Third Sunday of Easter
April 15, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

We often think of the Easter season as a hopeful time and it is - there is joy, new life and sometimes even spring.

We don't usually think of Easter as a season of doubts and questions. After all, we proclaim boldly: Alleluia! Christ is Risen! **Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!** That greeting doesn't seem to leave much room for ambiguity or doubt.

We sing lots of hymns about triumph and victory. In one we sing, "No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of Life." I love the tune and most of the words of that hymn, but I don't like that line. Doubt is a key component of Easter. Hope and doubt go hand in hand in the biblical stories of Jesus' resurrection and in our own lives.

In our Gospel story today, the risen Jesus tells his disciples to touch his wounded hands and feet to see that he's not a ghost. They do that and it brings them great joy, but it doesn't erase their doubts. We're told, "while in their joy, they were disbelieving and still wondering."

A similar thing happens at the end of the Gospel of Matthew - in Matthew's account of the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples. We're told, "When they saw him, they worshipped him; and all doubted." Almost every English version of the Bible translates this passage as, "they worshipped him but some doubted." But, that's not what the Greek says. It says they worshipped him, and *all* doubted.

The disciples worshipped and doubted at the same time. They had great joy in Jesus' presence while also disbelieving and wondering.

In both cases, Jesus doesn't condemn the disciples for their doubts. In Matthew he goes on to give them the great commission, telling them to go make disciples, baptize and teach. In our story today he tells them, you are witnesses. He gives the doubtful disciples important work to do. This means that when we sing and praise, rejoice and hope, and say Christ is risen, indeed, there is also room for doubt and disbelief. There is room to wonder: "How could this all be true? What does this mean for my life and for this beautiful yet brutal world?" Hope and doubt go hand in hand.

Hope and doubt actually have a lot in common because both leave us vulnerable.

When we hope, we can be disappointed. So sometimes to protect ourselves, we respond with cynicism and bitterness rather than hope. Why bother advocating for legislation for the dreamers, Congress will

never get it done. Forget trying to connect with those people, I'll never feel comfortable there. New life? Whatever - nothing will ever change.

When we doubt we acknowledge that we're not certain, we don't know; we open ourselves to ambiguity and uncertainty. So sometimes to protect ourselves, we turn to absolutes and stridency. We rigidly defend our beliefs and opinions on personal, religious and political issues rather than acknowledging that issues are complex, and that coming to solutions with others requires a willingness to question one's own positions.

If we protect ourselves from vulnerability, we may be spared some pain, but we also keep ourselves locked away from all the beauty in our world.

Hoping and doubting do leave us vulnerable. They also leave us open to possibility, to change, to surprise, to joy. Hope and doubt open up space for new life to happen for us.

It's not easy to remain open and vulnerable, especially in our world today. The good news is that the risen Jesus is also vulnerable.

The risen Jesus comes to us not so much as a glorious prince like that Easter hymn says. Instead, Jesus comes with vulnerability. We see that in how Jesus appears to those first disciples when they are locked away trying to protect themselves. Jesus doesn't storm into the room like a strident conqueror. He appears and says, "Peace be with you." He shows them his wounded hands and feet. He asks for something to eat - he is in need of their hospitality. He comes in peace, wounded and hungry. This humble, vulnerable approach helps the disciples to recognize Jesus and to be receptive to his teaching - teaching that opens their minds to understand the scriptures.

Jesus comes to us in the same way today. Jesus is here in his wounded body the church to say to each of us, peace be with you. He is here in bread and wine, his broken body and blood poured out. He is here in his word to open our minds to understand the scriptures.

With his presence, and as part of his wounded body the church, we can say, "Christ is risen indeed" boldly, even as we wonder. We can worship with great joy even as we doubt.

We can go into the world and remain vulnerable and open. We can go hopefully with a willingness to doubt. As we do, our lives will witness to the truth that new life is possible, that the humble, vulnerable Christ is risen indeed. We are witnesses to these things.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

