

Worship with McClure United Church

3rd Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2020

Opening:

Good morning and welcome - I am so glad you are able to join Laura and I as we offer you some thoughts and prayers that we hope will be a gift of worship for you. Tom Powell and his daughter Jennifer and grandson Adam Brookman – three generations will be offering special music today. Great treat. And I want to thank Max Cory for reading Scripture for us today. Our teammate Brian is taking a few Sundays off – Brian is finishing up the Clinical Pastoral Care class he has been teaching. So we will miss his wisdom this morning but hope that his time away allows him to focus on his teaching and perhaps take some much needed rest. Brian, Laura and I are doing our best to walk with you through this “physical distancing time” we want you to feel connected to us and to your church family. We invite your input as to how to do this better so we invite you to email or “go old school” and give us a call. We have several opportunities for connection going through a variety of platforms. Monday, Wednesday and Friday each member of the ministry team is taking turns posting a thoughtful little something for your consideration. We look forward to your responses to these posts.

Friday morning at 10am, Laura is hosting a coffee gathering through zoom and everyone is welcome to join in. Laura wanted you to know that you can join the coffee gathering even if you don't have a internet connection. If you contact Laura she can help you sort that out. The youth, young adult and kids of McClure continue to gather through zoom. There is information on our Facebook page on the website as to how to get involved.

So I think that is all the announcements I have for this morning. So let us prepare for a time of worship.

Get comfortable. Take a breath. Open your heart

Light a candle – to remind yourself that God is with you always.

Prayer:

Creator God, we come together (while apart) as your people; we come as a praising people singing your goodness; we come as a praying people, turning to you with our needs our joys and our commitments; we come as a people of doubt trusting your grace and we come as a listening people, open to your Word. Fill us with your love and empower us for faithful living we pray. Amen

Theme Conversation:

This week Laura read a book to the children called "The Way I Feel" by Janan Cain. It is a beautifully illustrated book that speaks to the many feelings we all have: silly, scared, disappointed, happy, sad, angry, thankful, frustrated, shy, bored, excited, jealous, proud. The last page of the book said: "feelings come and feelings go, I never know what they'll be. Silly or angry, happy or sad, they're all a part of me."

We then talked about the feeling of "doubt" and how this too is a normal part of our wide range of feelings. We talked about the disciple known as Doubting Thomas and that his doubt was normal. We all doubt sometimes. Doubt causes us to ask questions and wonder and those can lead us to new discoveries and understandings. Doubting faith and our beliefs is an important part of our faith journey.

Scripture: John 20:19-31

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." ²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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." ²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name

May God bless to our understanding and our living these words of Scripture.

Sermon:

I have always felt bad for Thomas. He has been called the doubter or the skeptic. Many argue, Jesus chastises him for having to see in order to believe. But I don't think he is all that bad in fact my heart goes out to the guy. I personally think there is great wisdom in doubting.

Can you imagine being poor Thomas? You walk into the upper room, perhaps you have been to the market to pick up provisions, or stepped outside to clear your head and take a walk or maybe you slipped out to check on accommodations and you step back in to the upper room and everyone is excited “oh my gosh, you should have been here, guess who was just here”, his fellow disciples exclaim? “Jesus, Jesus was here and he breathed in our faces, okay it was a bit weird, but then he showed us his wounds! It was really him!” // Jesus has come and freely given the disciples in the room what they need – Jesus freely gave the gathered disciples a glimpse of his wounded self – the upper room disciple got to see Jesus so the story tells us. But poor Thomas wasn’t there – he missed it and he struggles it wasn’t until a week later that Thomas has to ask for what Jesus gave the others without asking. Thomas has been called the patron saint of doubter, but really I think he’s the patron saint of poor timing.

I have a colleague who one year on Easter Sunday told her congregation, “ok, next week’s sermon is on doubt and the Christian faith,” then she invited people to write down their doubts, anonymously, and put them in the offering plate, she said she would read them and address them the following week. The next week the pews were packed but she received only four responses. Four people felt comfortable admitting their doubts.

I think we don’t admit doubt because we’re afraid of being judged; everyone else’s faith seems so solid. Maybe there’s something wrong with us because we have doubts. Or maybe we’re afraid that by admitting to doubts, we expose our weak places to those who would be only too happy to gleefully jump in – arms folded and with smug expressions – with a “I knew this Christianity thing was ridiculous.”

But here’s the thing: Jesus is so matter of fact towards Thomas. In fact, Thomas doesn’t even have to ask Jesus directly for proof. Jesus walks right in, bids them peace and says, “Here Thomas, put your hand here and touch there”. It’s as if Thomas’s doubt is the most natural thing in the world. In fact, the word for faith and the word for doubt come from the same Greek root. It’s as if they’re two sides of the same coin. It’s as if – you can’t have one without the other. If your faith doesn’t have any doubt mixed in with it, it’s not faith, it’s certainty. And I don’t think it’s a good idea to be certain about things when it comes to the God which is beyond understanding. A God power that pops into unexpected places and loves in ways that are not conventional. A God power that always breaks the rules in favour of justice and compassion.

The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner (pronounced BEEK-ner) said, “Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don’t have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”

Consider these words written in a letter years ago:

“Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.

There is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was dead. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. – I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake?”

Do you hear the doubt? Do you hear the wrestling? Here is someone who is not giving up, but is continuing to struggle, listening, yearning for God, even in the midst of the doubt.

The doubter here is Mother Teresa.

The book Come Be My Light contains decades of her letters and journals, revealing a woman who inspired millions by her compassion and mercy but who was gripped with long periods of doubt and torment over God’s absence. Now, if Mother Teresa can feel these things, who is immune from them?

Thomas is big on questions, daring to ask the questions no one else asks.

Earlier in the gospel of John - chapter 14 Jesus says:

“Do not let your heart be troubled... 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...and you know the way to the place where I am going.”

Beautiful words of comfort and hope.

Then Thomas says to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”

Thomas kind of spoils the mood, doesn’t he? But you know what? We need Thomas to ask that question, because listen to what Jesus says next.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth and the life.”

Imagine if Thomas had never asked that question. We might never have received one of the most elegant statements about Jesus and our identity as his followers.

I am the way – if you want to know which way to go, look to me.

I am the truth – If you want to know what grounds your being, look to me.

I am the life – If you want to find your life look to me.

It’s a beautiful answer, but not a simple one.

It probably led to more questions. Questions are good. They are what keeps our faith alive and moving.

If like Thomas you are feeling doubt about whether the resurrection is true, whether life really wins out over death. Or if like Mother Teresa you doubt whether God really loves you.

I invite you to look where they looked -in their doubt.

Where does Thomas look? Thomas looks at Jesus wounds. The nail holes, the pierced side.

And where did Mother Teresa look? – she looked at the people broken and wounded in the streets of Calcutta.

They both looked into places of pain – and my hunch is the doubts didn't feel so important. But rather living the radical love of Jesus in the midst of pain is what mattered.

Perhaps this is where we need to look when our doubt is raging and our souls are aching. Lord knows there are many places in our world filled with pain and brokenness. And it would seem that these are the places that the God power is breaking through with hope and light and kindness and love. We may not find answers in these places but we will find our faith and the will to continue to be followers of the way of Jesus. Doubts and all.

Prayers:

Let us offer ourselves to God in a time of prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious God, we thank you for the messages of this Easter season: life out of death, hope out of despair, love out of hate.

Help us, God, risk being vulnerable... looking for goodness, joy, beauty, kindness in the world around us. Help us to be part of all that is lovely, all that is holy, all that is good: that integrity, honesty, respect, and caring for ourselves and others, for our community and world, may be most present in our thinking and acting.

We remember, and hold in prayer, family, friends and members of our community, who are struggling... struggling with all the regular challenges of life and all the challenges made greater by isolation, sickness, financial worries, worries about loved ones... and grieve over all the loss many have had to endure loss: loss of a loved one.. loss of work... loss of special plans... loss of a sense of intimacy and connection with other.

We often feel helpless in the face of pain... grant them courage and strength... and grant us wisdom in our care for them.

And we pray, God, for everyone impacted by the horrible tragedy in Nova Scotia. There really are no words... yet you know what's on our hearts... and we offer all that is heavy there to you now in a moment of quiet.

We pray for our hurting world and ask for wisdom and compassion that, in whatever little ways we are able, we may be healers of the world's pain and injustice... that we may be hope in the midst of despair, joy in the midst of sadness, faith in the midst of doubt, connection in the midst of isolation

We pray that, in this Easter season, we may see you all around us... as new life springs around us, so does your life and love. Help us to reach out even when we feel afraid and uncertain.

Help us to remember the Easter message... a message of hope and love... even when life feels like it is crashing in around us. Help us to live the Easter message every day.

These prayers we ask in the name of the one who taught us to pray this way...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen

Blessing:

And now as we end our time together in worship, we hold on to those words that Jesus offered to his disciples: “peace be with you”

And we go from here surrounded by the peace that has been offered to us, a peace that is so much stronger than fear, hate, despair and doubt.

a peace that challenges us, inspires us and calls us into new life.

Peace be with you.