

John 20:19-31

20:19 When 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."

20:20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

20:21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

20:22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

20:23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

20:24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

20:25 So 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."

20:26 A 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."

20:27 Then 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."

20:28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

20:29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

20:30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.

20:31 But 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.

Prior to...They prayed for boldness in the face of opposition. Peter and the others had been arrested then gave testimony to the power of the Risen Lord who brought healing to a man. The Council could not deny the signs being done. When they prayed, they were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. And this is what happened next...

Acts 4:32-35

4:32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

4:33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

4:34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and

brought the proceeds of what was sold.

4:35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 4:36 There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement").³⁷ He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Proclamation of the Word

There is one in every crowd. The critical thinker who wants to poke holes in everything. The one who wants to analyze the data and see the proof for himself. The realist. There is always a Thomas in every crowd. He gets the nickname "The Doubter" in our church tradition. You can decide for yourself if that name is deserved. After all, we forget that when Jesus announced that he would go to Jerusalem and face his death. It was Thomas who said to the others, "let us go and die with him." He was committed. Thomas was all in.

I am a big fan of Thomas because I see myself in him. He is pragmatic. He wasn't there in the room when Jesus first came in because he was probably planning and preparing for how they were going to hide out for fear of the authorities. He was probably out gathering provisions, being the practical one.

Thomas was the one who wasn't convinced by the others' joy and rejoicing. He was the one who went a whole week, not sure that resurrection was real until Jesus showed himself to Thomas. But Thomas is one of the first to believe in spite of his critical thinking and doubts. In that moment he experienced the presence of Jesus and despite what his left-brain, logical self thought, he believed. He was given the gift of faith, and it changed everything.

Theologian Paul Tillich wrote that the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty. Certainty and faith are different. In fact, certainty is the root of fundamentalism and extremism. Many of the world's problems are caused by such zealous certainty. Faith though is a joyful response to an encounter with the risen Jesus. Thomas is a believer in spite of his doubts and by the grace of God.

Today's passages of Scripture call us to faithful belief and faithful practice. Last week I noticed a sermon title from a friend who posted his Easter Sunday sermon, the title "The Resurrection. So What?" What difference does the resurrection make? Does it make a difference? So what?

The first generation of believers tell us that it made all the difference to them. The church is a community of the risen Lord. And it changes everything. As we see in our passage from Acts, the community of believers were gathered together unified in their faith. As they told what God had done in Jesus Christ, a great grace was upon them. Two marks of the early church are unity and generosity.

First of all, they were unified. In spite of their differences over the color of the carpet in the Sanctuary, they were unified. Throughout the ages of church schism, divisions, splinters, and denominations, they

were unified in the essentials. And the one essential that makes all the difference is this: they all professed to believe "And on the third day, he rose from the dead!"

When God touches your life and changes your heart, a new community is formed. A community marked by great grace and great power. A joyful generosity was the fruit of their faith. Giving is a holy act and joyful response to God's great grace! In fact, good old Brother Barnabas sells a field and brings the proceeds to share with the church. As an act of faithfulness, he brings the money and lays it at the apostles' feet.

I don't know about you, but when a brother or sister gives witness to what God is doing in his or her life, I am encouraged. They are being a Barnabas to others. Did you catch that? Barnabas was just his nickname, but it is how we remember him. His real name was Joseph. His church friends called him Barnabas because it meant "Encourager." Barnabas knew something about grace because he was so moved by the Spirit in his life, that he went and sold a field and brought the money to church to be used for the Lord's work. Barnabas had been touched by God's grace, and in turn, shared that great grace.

Do you know anyone like that, a Barnabas? Someone so grateful for God's grace that they become generous givers? If you know a Barnabas, I bet he or she is a grateful person.

As many of you know we are hoping to strengthen our witness and ministry by improving our "meeting house" here at Fort Hill Church. We need to improve our current facilities so that they will serve us well for the next 50 years. Just as the early Christians shared their possessions to meet the needs of their community, one way we will do so is make our facilities handicap accessible. It is truly painful to watch those with physical needs try to navigate our buildings and feel welcome here. Only the Sanctuary is truly accessible. Christians pool their money to meet one another's needs. One way we will impact our witness is by making our facilities accessible to those who have that need. The choir has a need for more usual space, and our children do not need to be in a building with asbestos. And it is made possible through the gifts of folks like Barnabas.

One couple who decided to give a gracious gift, shared with me their story. He said, "Laura, we say we trust the Lord with our whole lives. We have taught it to others in Sunday School. And we made a decision to give the biggest gift we have ever given to help bridge generations at Fort Hill Church because we decided if we talk the talk, we better walk the walk. We are going to trust God and leave a legacy to meet the needs of God's people."

Now that is faith, but not certainty. Even if they are uncertain about their future, they are trusting that their lives are in God's strong and capable hands. I think that sort of generosity is only possible when we have experienced that great grace of God. This man is one of our Barnabas'. She is a Barnabas- an encourager, whose life have been touched by the great grace of God, so touched that they are moved to share generously what God has entrusted to their care.

That is how the Spirit of the living God works. Remember the guy who gave his donkey on Palm Sunday for Jesus to ride. That would be like giving up your new car up for the Lord's purposes. The disciple told him, "The Lord needs it" and the owner gave it.

Remember the woman who lavished pure nard all over Jesus, anointing him as an act of love before he went to the cross to die. She "wasted" a year's salary in that generous act of love for her Lord.

Remember the widow who dropped 2 pennies in the Temple offering box? No one else saw it, but Jesus noticed. She gave every last cent to the Lord, and the heavens rejoiced for her great love and that great grace. All of them acted in response to the great grace first shown to them by God. What we know about God is that God loves and God gives. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son. God loves and God gives sacrificially and in abundance. A mark of the early church was that same love and sacrificial generosity. They shared all they had, and no one had need. And those outside the church noticed and said, "Oh, how they love each other." What a witness!

The early church lived in a new way because the resurrection changed everything. A new community of faith was born in the Spirit. We are signs of what Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe." 2000 years later we are here, not having seen him with our own eyes, yet we believe. Jesus was right!

When I am being a Thomas, I need a Barnabas, an encourager, who shows me with his actions the way things can be and should be. In fact, I need a whole community of Barnabas-es to remind me of a much bigger, grander vision. "A vision not defined by failure but possibility, not governed by scarcity but by abundance, not ruled by remembered offenses but set free by forgiveness and reconciliation" as David Lose writes.ⁱ

The resurrection of Jesus makes the impossible, possible. Forgiveness is possible. Healing is possible. Abundance is present when we share God's gifts. When it appears that we have failed, God opens the tomb and raises us to new life again. That is a promise you can trust and believe.

The risen Lord has given us the gift of the Spirit and created the church. And we have to tell one another good news, to be an encourager like Barnabas. But like Thomas, we need to see faith demonstrated. May we all be moved by the power of God's great grace and share generously what God has given to us as a witness to our Risen Lord!

And hopefully the world will notice and say, "Oh, how they love one another!"

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

ⁱ David Lose, "Easter 2B: On Old Realities and New," posted on April 6, 2015 at www.inthetime.com