

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

SIGNS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

John 20: 19 – 31 April 19, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

On that first Easter, women went to the tomb – maybe to finish preparing the body of Jesus for burial – maybe to just pay their respects to the dead Jesus. To their surprise and alarm, Jesus was not there. A young man dressed in a white robe said, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified? Well, he is not here. He is raised. He is going ahead of you to Galilee.”

Galilee? Jesus had spent most of his time in Galilee. All his disciples seem to have been from Galilee. It is a little like the Christmas story – why Bethlehem? Surely more important places for Jesus to be born! Why Galilee? Why not Rome or some influential city?

No, Jesus goes back to Galilee to meet that very same group of disciples who many times disappointed him, who fled into the darkness the night he was arrested. Jesus returns to them – Jesus returns to us.

Our text for today speaks of Jesus' appearance to these disciples. They are hiding, behind locked doors. They are full of fear and doubt. They did not come to Jesus – he comes to them. God is shepherd – doesn't wait for the lost sheep to return. No, the Good Shepherd searches for the sheep. Thomas, one of the twelve, (he is also called the Twin) is not present the first time Jesus appears to the disciples. We have labeled him “Doubting Thomas.” To me it is a hasty label. The disciples said to Thomas the very same words the women said to the disciples – “We have seen the Lord.” They didn't believe. They were not labeled “doubters.” But the label has stuck with Thomas. We know about labels that stick with people often because of one experience or incident. A girl gets a bad reputation in school and it seems to be there forever. A person is in a bind and doesn't tell the truth and they are labeled “Liar” for all time. Talk with someone on probation from prison and see how that “prison” label is most difficult to put behind them. We know Thomas – doubting Thomas. Jesus offers to give Thomas exactly what he demanded. The words of Jesus parallel Thomas's demands for belief. Truth is, even though the word “doubt” is indelibly linked with Thomas in the popular interpretation of this story, the word doubt doesn't occur in this passage. A literal translation of verse 27 reads “Do not be unbelieving, but believing. This is the only occurrence of this pair of adjectives in John's Gospel. The contrast is important. Jesus exhorts Thomas to move from a position of unbelief to belief. Jesus will meet the conditions that Thomas set for his belief. But it is not the touching Jesus that leads Thomas to this confession of faith, but Jesus' gracious offering of himself. Jesus is not trying to shame Thomas. That forced faith will not stay with you long. Jesus is leading Thomas to belief. “If you know me, you will know the Father also.”

The text ends with words that “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of all his disciples, which are not written in this book.” To identify Jesus' resurrection appearance as a sign means that, like Jesus' other signs, the theological truth of the resurrection appearance lies not in the appearance itself, but in that to which it points. That is, the resurrection appearance stories are about something other than Jesus' miraculous return from the dead. This sign reveals Jesus' victory over death and the current rulers of this world. The truth is

Jesus' continuing presence as the Good Shepherd. Thomas sees this sign and it points to God in Jesus and so leads to faith.

There are signs not written in this book. I think our UCC slogan has it right – “God is still speaking.” Many times we miss the signs of God's presence because they come from people, they come from places we do not expect to hear a word from the Lord. Signs come from a child. A stranger. Someone so familiar we don't hear them anymore, because we think we know what they are going to say before they speak. And signs are not just words. Sometimes the sign of God's presence is in a card we get in the mail. Sometimes it is a phone call or an email. God's presence is in a visit, the baking and taking of a chocolate cake to someone in distress. Sometimes, a sign of God's presence is in the spoken words, “You are a good person.” Most of those signs are not written in this book.

I like it when the church is a sign of God's presence. Too many times the church has not offered the sign of God's presence when it was needed the most. I think of the slavery issue, civil rights in the 60's. Currently the church is forced to deal with the inclusion of and giving integrity to the gay and lesbian community. The church, like many times before is more afraid of losing members and prestige than it is in working for justice and inclusion.

I want to use a story of the time when the church became a sign of God's presence. My friend, Brett, worked in a church that was on the edge of a rough neighborhood. They were constantly missing things and having to make sure doors were secured. They discovered that money was being taken from the Upper Room Devotional book fund. You got a copy of the monthly devotional book and left your money in the box. They also discovered that during worship, the donuts disappeared out of the kitchen. They caught Jose, red-handed. Jose was a 12 year old neighborhood kid. Church members wanted to put him in jail. Then they discovered that Jose took the money and the donuts because his family had nothing to eat on the weekend. Instead of wanting to prosecute, the church reached out in compassion. There was real effort to help Jose's family and other children in the area. Jose became an acolyte – frankly, one way they would know where he was during worship. Working with the family, it became clear the Jose would be much better off in one of the conference homes for children. The church worked tirelessly – and I must say that Brett worked tirelessly in order to get Jose to a better place to grow up. I was there one time and went with Brett as he took a train ticket to the home so the mother could go visit Jose. To prosecute or reach out in compassion. Compassion is a sign of the presence of God

Signs of God's Presence. They are not all written in this book we call the Bible. God is still speaking in and through our words that witness to justice and in our work and acts of kindness that lead to peace. Let our signs – our words, our work, our gifts, our relationships, speak of the presence of God in our world today. Let us be attentive to the Signs of God's Presence among us. There are more signs that we might think.