

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 8, 2018

Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

## ***You Don't Have To Be There!***

You had to be there! You just had to be there!

I find that it is hard - try as I might - to match someone else's passion and excitement for something, when I myself was not there with them. I can be happy for them to have seen the spectacular sunset or experienced the amazing meal, but if I wasn't there.... it's not my experience.

I think this may be what poor Thomas faced, when he wasn't there when his friends got to see the resurrected Jesus and he didn't. He had missed out. And he makes it very clear that he is not believing for himself until he has the same experience.

Which is our situation as well. Because we will not get to see the risen Christ, in person, face to face, with an invitation to actually touch him. Which is in fact the point of our reading today.

*Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet have come to believe....*

That's us. And I think that it may be harder for us to believe, because the risen Christ is NOT walking around any more, appearing through walls in response to our need to have proof that he is who he said he was and did what he said he'd do.

No, these days we don't get proof like that. Instead we get people... people who tell us what happened to them, who see with eyes that we don't have yet, who move through their days with a joy and peace not of this world. And when they tell us the source of all this - Jesus - we're called to believe them, and we're blessed when we do.

If the risen Christ has not appeared in your life, then your confidence in him will have to come from trusting the witness of those who did see him. And that's why we need each other - we need to tell each other about the difference that knowing Christ has made in our lives. And if you can't articulate that, then you need to hang out with people who can.

We are encouraged, sustained, and grow not just by encountering the risen, but also by believing others who have.

And who are these who have seen the risen Christ? [Hold up Bible] These people have. You want to know what it was really like to meet Jesus in the flesh? Read all about it right here. You can't get any closer to first hand stories than what we read last week and this morning and what you'll hear in the weeks to come.

And there are plenty of others who have experienced the resurrection of Jesus through the centuries and millennia!

This week I came across the testimony of Nancy J. Knol, who shared in worship at her church on Easter. She suggests that perhaps the biggest curse of the Fall (Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit) was the fact that what had been whole became fragmented, and that God no longer "walked in the garden in the cool of the day" with Adam and Eve.

She writes:

*It has often been said that a single, important event has a way of dividing our lives into two categories—before and after. In the case of our family, this important event was most unwelcome—our second child, Adam John was diagnosed with a childhood cancer called “Wilm’s Tumor.” His illness changed our lives dramatically.*

*Life revolved around doctor appointments, surgeries, hospital visits, and desperately trying to find some semblance of “normal” for the sake of Adam and our two other children, Jane and Luke. So a wiggly tooth, or learning to ride a bike, or a trip to the beach or reading a book together became spectacular—far more noteworthy and delightful than they would have been in the absence of the shadow of death. My husband John hoped for a cure—I have to confess that when I heard the word “cancer” I did not expect a happy ending.*

*In preparing this testimony, I kept remembering an event that happened two years after Adam’s death. Luke, age 7 was looking for something to do one lazy summer afternoon. His sister, Jane was visiting a friend, and John was working. I was earning a little extra income by proofreading for a local publisher at home. Luke told me he was working on a “big project,” and I couldn’t see it until it was finished.*

*He occasionally raced into the house to get some item of clothing or some old rags, and I could hear the slight “bang” of the toolshed door from time-to-time. When he had finished, he pulled me down the hill to the driveway so that I could look up and get the full effect. He was very proud.*

*Ah...yes. It was quite a view from below. Perched on the fence, leaning against the house for balance was a smallish figure. He was wearing a grey sweatshirt, navy sweatpants, and old tennis shoes. His head was the tetherball, long ago stuffed away in the toolshed after the rope broke, gently discoloring and deflating over the years of banishment among the cobwebs. Upon his head perched a bright red baseball cap. The hands were stuffed mittens. It was an impressive little person indeed.*

*What my little son did not realize was that he had spent the afternoon recreating his brother. The clothes were mostly Adam’s, and the baseball cap especially had become a kind of symbol for Adam’s fight with cancer as it covered his bald little head—a head as bald and round as a tether ball. No, Luke was unaware of what he had done, but the rest of us all drew in our breath every time we drove into the driveway and looked up at that drooping, yet somehow stalwart little figure resting against his home, waiting at the gate for us.*

*Unconsciously, Luke had valiantly worked at resurrection. And this is what we all do, or try to do, in the face of great loss. How do I become whole again, with that big gaping hole in my life? If it is a marriage that has been lost, do I dare try again? If it is a loss of reputation, do I work hard to polish it? If I have hurt my friend, do I try to repair the damage I have done? If I can no longer pray, do I go through the motions of prayer anyway?*

*And in asking these brave questions, we are wondering—aren’t we?—if our attempts can possibly “make all things new”... Better perhaps, but not new. Only the “big Resurrection,” the Easter Resurrection can do that.*

*But, just as our gathering every Sunday is a rehearsal for our gathering at the great feast of God, practicing resurrection this side of heaven is an echo, a shadow, a lowercase imitation for that day when, as we are told in I Corinthians “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye...the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will all be changed...THEN the saying that is written will come true: Death has been swallowed up in victory! Where, O death, is your victory? Where O death is your sting? ...Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

*A few lines from Wendell Berry (Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front) may give voice to how we show the world that we are an Easter people as we wait for that final Resurrection:*

*Love the Lord. Love the world...  
Love someone who does not deserve it...  
Ask the questions that have no answers...*

*Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest...  
Listen to carrion—put your ear close,  
and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.  
Expect the end of the world.  
Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.  
Be joyful though you have considered all the facts...  
Practice resurrection.*

*Just moments before his death, Adam regained consciousness. He opened his eyes WIDE and said, "I see EVERYTHING! I see EVERYTHING!" And we have wondered so often since: What did he see? We will not know until it is our turn to go Home, but I would like to think that Adam saw a garden, glorious and colorful beyond our imagining, and standing in the middle of it- the Tree of Life, and God Himself reaching out his hand to my beloved son, Adam, in the cool of the day. (Perspectives blogpost, April 4, 2018)*

I believe her - I didn't have to be there.  
Because of Nancy, I believe, and I believe again, that Christ was raised and will raise each of us.

That's Nancy's witness... But there are Nancy's all over the place. Including right here.

Just this week, I sat right here in this front pew with one of you, as you told me how Christ came alive in your life again on Easter Sunday. And you told me again about a time a number of years ago, when you saw Jesus in your kitchen, reaching out in love saying "I'm right here - I'm right here."

And I needed to hear it again.  
And while I wasn't there - I didn't see Jesus in your kitchen - or my kitchen - my faith grew in the hearing of it.

I didn't need to be there - I believe you.  
And because of you I believe, and I believe again, that Christ was raised and will raise all of us.

When we have deeply moving experiences like that we need to share them - and more than once!  
*Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet have come to believe....*

Because if we're not going to believe by seeing - then it has to be by other means... hearing, loving, forgiving, caring, receiving, sharing,....

You had to be there? No - you have to be here!  
To hear from Thomas, and Nancy, and each other.  
So that you too can believe, and believe again, that Christ was raised.

Amen.