

Worship Service - "Stepping Out"

Easter 2, Year C,

24th April, 2022

Acts 5:27-32 NRSV / John 20:19-31 NSRV

Prelude

Gospel Opening [Oh Lord, How Excellent](#)

United Voices Choir w/ Anthony Brown, posted to YouTube
by First Baptist Church of Glenarden, FBCG, Upper Marlboro, MD

Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Music Praise to the Lord, the Almighty **37**

Call to Worship [responsive]

One: We gather as a people on a journey.

All: We believe & we have doubts, we do good and we sin. We are imperfect humans, and still beloved by God!

One: Love and grace. Hope and faith. These are the essence of the one we call God.

All: We seek forgiveness & grace from the One and from those we've harmed.

One: Assured of that grace, we are ready to grow again.

All: We yearn for a new way, a new perspective, and a clear path.

One: Though we are full of trust and full of doubt, we are here. Speak to us, God!

Continue creating us!

All: Inspire our hearts. Enlighten our minds. Guide our actions. Amen

Invocation [responsive]

One: Lord Jesus Christ, the light of your love shines on, illuminating the places where you are present. As the bewildered disciples pondered the stories of your appearance, you penetrated the darkness of their fear and doubt with your word of peace. You showed them the appalling marks of evil pierced on your hands and feet. You opened their minds to understand why you had to die to defeat such evil and death.

Teach us not to hide from our doubt, but to recognize it as a door to mystery and to deeper faith. After all, the disciples' fear became a visitation as they saw you among them, risen and triumphant. Thomas' doubt became a moment of revelation as he saw and touched you, and finally believed.

This morning we pray for the many men and women in our society who have no faith at all. There are so many who live without hope, without knowledge of your resurrection, without your light in their lives. Grant us the courage to live as witnesses to your resurrection. Risen Christ, be light in our world.

We pray for those in our congregation this morning who find it difficult to believe. Lord knows that they are not alone, but in the best of company: even Christ's own disciples struggled to believe all that they had seen and heard. Loving Christ, it is your Presence that removes all fear and erases all doubts: so come, and grant the doubting Thomases in our midst your presence & peace.

And grant to all of us, living Lord Christ, renewed faith, great courage, and your boundless peace.

We rejoice this morning with...*{insert names}*

Loving God, we pray for....*{insert names}*

Amen.

Gospel Reading John 20:19-31 NSRV

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."

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

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

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

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

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

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."

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."

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."

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

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."

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

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.

Message – “Stepping Out” - Pastor Glenn

So this morning we're going to start our message with an interactive exercise. Look in the pew around you and pick something up to hold and take a look at, whether it's a hymnal, a bulletin, or one of the cards or pencils in the pew in front of you. Take a good look at it. Notice the color and as many details as you can with your eyes. Take a minute and really look at it. Then feel around the surface and edges with your fingers. Notice the shape and details of the edges. Turn it around in your hands. Next tap on it, flick it, hear the sounds it makes when you engage it. Finally, hold it up to your nose and inhale, see what smell it has. Probably a little musty and dusty if it's a hymnal or pew card, sitting here in this empty sanctuary most of the time. Once you've really checked it out, you can put it back.

When we think of what makes something real to us, it's largely our individual experience that defines what is real and what isn't to us. We often rely heavily on our senses to define our reality. What we can see, feel, taste, and hear is what we view as real. Even if we don't directly experience something, we often rely on the observations of others to relay those details.

When we think of scientific facts, those are simply truths that others have done the legwork for us in sizing up whatever the object or reality they are reporting back to us. And our experience this morning is no different than the experience of those men and women in the locked room in our story from John this morning. They too experienced reality with their senses. Jesus was very real to them.

They had been on the road with him. They saw the healings, they heard the sermons. They

pondered the parables with him. They saw him arrested, and some saw him crucified, and they all knew he died and was buried. Now they've seen and touched him resurrected. His continued existence is reality for them now. Except for one.

“Doubting Thomas” is a term most of us are familiar with, I'm sure. Most sermons on this passage give him a bad rap for his lack of faith. But let's think about that. Thomas wasn't present the first time Jesus appeared in the room so he didn't have the same opportunities as the others. And they didn't sign on right away, sight unseen either. Let's not forget just last week in our passage from Luke that Peter didn't believe Mary Magdalene and the other women when they said the angels had told them that Jesus had risen. Yet poor Thomas is made out in a negative light because he stepped out to run an errand at the wrong time. But is that really the point of this story anyway? After all, this story is highlighting a major turning point in the faith.

Right now we have a room of people who all experienced Jesus as a living, breathing, in the flesh human being. Within a couple of decades from this moment, they all will be gone. No one is then left who can testify to the real living, breathing Jesus. All that is left is the community, the groups of believers that this initial group spread out and evangelized. And maybe that is where the real shortcoming of Thomas lies. It's not that he didn't believe without seeing, but that he didn't trust in his community, his fellow believers. These are the women and men he's been traveling with for a couple of years now. They are his fellowship, his brothers and sisters in the faith. Yet he doesn't have faith in them.

Jesus is highlighting in some respect the fact that in this new community, one should be able to trust in the testimony of one's faith family. He knows going forward there will be no direct evidence to be shared. It is solely their testimony, initially in person, but going forward into the future, just the testimony of shared stories, some written down into the texts we have in front of us today. He tells them, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” But how successful can the message be when the messenger, indeed even any real direct witness of the messenger, is long gone in the annals of history?

Well, let's consider some real facts. Based on the population around where Jesus walked and taught in his physical ministry in Palestine, a few hundred or optimistically a thousand may have come to the faith in Jesus' lifetime. However, in the centuries after, literally billions have come to the faith, when Jesus was not seen except figuratively in paintings.

Jesus imparts the Spirit into that initial group, starting a chain of Spirit leading that carried on through the centuries. The church spread throughout the known world because the early disciples and evangelists were inspired to testify effectively to what they had witnessed and learned, and those they taught likewise testified to the truths they had heard, and eventually wrote down.

But was it their Spirit-inspired oration alone that exponentially grew the new movement? Or was there more to it than that? The word that is used in John for “breathe” is an oddly specific Greek word for “breathe,” *emphysao*, that is only used in two other places in the entire Bible, in Genesis 2 and Ezekiel 37. In both those passages, God breathes life into the dust or the skeletons of the dead and creates new life.

This isn't just a spiritual hand off from Jesus through his exhale, this is the creation of something new, a new way of living and being, through the leading of the Spirit. New life from where there was no life. This, after all, wasn't just a bunch of individuals running hither and yore as independent evangelists. This was a new community, a new way of living together in contrast to what had always been.

We have this conception that once Jesus was gone, his presence was no longer experienced. But is that really true? After all, isn't there a reason this new community that began to expand across the world was called “the body of Christ?” Jesus was teaching of a new way of living, living into the kin-dom of heaven that draws near. An upside-down order from what the world thought was important. The “peace be with you” that Jesus speaks of involves bringing into the fold the marginalized and outcast. It's redefining in a radical way who is first and last, blessed and cursed, rich and poor. Jesus' peace invites the lion to see the lamb as neighbor and friend, the Jew to speak with the Samaritan, and the prostitute to dine with the Pharisee.

Such actions show, to those with eyes to see, a new way of being in the world, a vision inspired by the in-breaking of the kin-dom of God present in Jesus' very existence. It is this peacemaking work, the core of his ministry, in no small part, that got Jesus killed.

If we wish to call ourselves disciples of Jesus, we must be willing to step out boldly into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. We must be willing to take risks, and work together, sharing a lifestyle and message that can be just as challenging today as it was two thousand years ago.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it bluntly: “When Christ calls a [person], he bids him come and die.” The first disciples found that out all too well in the years following Jesus' resurrection. All of them faced persecution, many faced a martyr's death as well. While most of us in the global north do not face death for our discipleship today, the fact remains that following Christ and engaging in the ministry we are called to, and led in by the Spirit, often bring one into conflict with many public policies and social norms – and this conflict is not without its own cost.

If we take our call to discipleship seriously, it should be clear that not only is there a cost to bear, but that we do not, and CAN NOT, do this on our own. The temptation to sin by avoidance is too great. By ourselves, we want to fit in, we want to maintain our social status, we want to preserve our financial stability and good name – all of which are

threatened by the work Jesus calls us to do. The Spirit is sent to each of us to give us strength, fortitude and guidance. But just as importantly, we are called to community.

Together we are the body of Christ. We are given Jesus' eyes to see the injustice and inequality of the world. We are given Christ's hands to work to undo that injustice and inequality, to serve our fellow human beings and to reach out with a hand up. We are given Divine feet to move us out into the world to find the work that needs done, to walk with (and sometimes march for) the downtrodden and marginalized.

Those first disciples had the memory of the physical experience of Jesus. They could remember seeing his face, hearing his voice, feeling his hands and even smelling his breath as he breathed the Spirit unto them. Today, Jesus' presence can still be felt. His body is felt and experienced by the work that we do.

Many Christians see the darkness in the world today and point the blame away in many directions. Or even worse, just give up and look for the end times that must surely be just around the corner. But when was the last time we took an honest look in the mirror. Where have we really been in recent years as things have grown dimmer? Have we been out in the thick of things in our community, touching people's lives in a real way, making a real difference and being a witness to the work of Jesus and the Spirit in our lives and our world? Or have we spent most of that time inside these walls, keeping largely to ourselves, wondering why there have been less and less people coming through those doors? Sure we do make occasional efforts and do some good things. But are we defined by our witness?

Our scripture stories today make a few things perfectly clear. Our mission involves a communal faith, that relies on our working together and trusting in our witness together, not leaving room for doubt between us. Jesus breathes the Spirit into us, sending us out of our locked rooms into the world outside in need of our witness and our work.

The challenge we have now as the body of Christ is how to re-engage with a world we have largely stepped away from as a community for awhile now. Where is the Spirit leading us? How can we reflect Jesus' presence to folks who are no longer interested in what we've always done on Sunday mornings? In many ways, we've come full circle. Like those first disciples, we're faced with reaching a darkening world in need of light, a world of "nones" and "spiritual but not religious."

It's a challenge but a great opportunity as well. My hope and prayer is that we can find a way to be the church we are called to be, and be the new apostles, the presence of Jesus to those in such need around us. May we find the path or paths the Spirit is leading us to. Amen.

Special Giving Focus: Pastor's Discretionary Fund

A Call to Serve

The bounty of God's grace has blessed us in so many ways. God's love was manifested in the ultimate gift of Jesus, who is the Christ. Let us demonstrate our love through the sharing of our tokens of time, talent, and finances that God may be glorified.

A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude*

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

From our hearts and from our hands, we humbly and gladly present these gifts to you, O God, that they may be used to serve you and to bless your people, through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen

Hymn

We Walk by Faith

570

Benediction

Jesus said: "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am now sending you".

He believes in you. The busy world awaits your compassion. Sometimes you will give your best yet fail. At other times you will succeed in spite of your stumbling.

Go gladly, daring to succeed or fail to the glory of God, and then at the very end, nothing shall dismay you. God believes in us With Christ's own breath within us, we shall travel well.

The help of the saving Christ, the wisdom of the Living God, and the support of the loving Spirit, will be with you every step of the way, now and always.

Amen!

(Adapted from a benediction written by Bruce Prewer, and posted on **Bruce Prewer's Homepage**. <http://www.bruceprewer.com/>)

Postlude