

“I Believe!”

Today we are celebrating Second Easter Sunday! It is the Second Sunday of the Church Liturgical Easter Season. It is also the Second Sunday when the Gospel Lectionary Scripture Reading is about the revealing of the Resurrected Jesus Christ. We call today our Second Easter Sunday because we are highlighting the celebration of Easter again, so members and friends, who were unable to be with us on Easter can join in our Easter Celebration. The following video reminds us of the importance of our continuing to celebrate Easter because “Easter kept happening!” [The video, “*Post Easter Hangover*” was shown.]

Yes, as the video indicated, “Easter kept happening!” One emphasis from the video, which I see as helpful, comes from its discussion of the second part of the Gospel Reading – the portion which records what happened a week after Easter when the disciples were again gathered behind locked doors, including Thomas. The video summarized why Jesus appeared again to the disciples that second Sunday. It reported, Jesus essentially said to Thomas, **“Do what it takes to find belief.”** Now, Jesus did not actually say that but he showed Thomas everything the previously absent disciple had earlier demanded to see of Jesus’ wounds. Further, Jesus told him to touch those marks of his torture. So, Jesus’ message to Thomas was, “Do what it takes to find belief.”

Is there anyone here today, who had not previously heard some version of the story of doubting Thomas? I suspect, our familiarity with that report has led most of us to listen to Thomas’ response to Jesus with lessened interest. His words may just pass us by. But, today, we are going to take how and what Thomas said very seriously.

Jesus concluded his confrontation with Thomas by saying at the end of **verse 27, “Stop your doubting, and believe!”** Then in **verse 28, “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”** Instead of thinking of Thomas’ response as a feeble reply to the Risen Jesus’ actions and challenge, perhaps we need to recognize he was very passionate and committed.

Although the Gospel of John portrays Jesus’ reaction to Thomas’ declaration, as specifically being addressed to the disciple, let me suggest, it actually is much more important for every believer following Jesus’ Ascension. **For in verse 29, “Jesus said to him, ‘Do you believe because you see me? How happy are those who believe without seeing me!’”** Our Risen Lord’s words strongly infer there would be persons, who would believe in him and his resurrection without seeing him! Further, such belief brings happiness and joy to those, who believe without seeing the Risen Jesus Christ!

That raises the subject of how one believes in Jesus Christ as our Crucified and Resurrected Savior and Son of God. Actually, the process is quite simple. First, the Risen Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, to his remaining 11 disciples, to over 500 persons at the same time, and even to Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of his followers. The record of those experiences is recorded in the Gospels, The Book of Acts, and the Letters or Epistles, which are included in the New Testament. Those testimonies were shared verbally by the Original Disciples and Apostles in very threatening times and at great cost to their own personal welfare and lives. Many of them lost their lives, while spreading this Good News. Further, the promised transformation of believers’ lives because of the New Faith Relationship with God, has actually, been experienced by many Christians – believers from the time following Jesus’ birth, public ministry, death, and resurrection. The combination of those two truths – the suffering testimony of witnesses and the shared experience of the New Life by believers – along with God’s and Christ’s continual presence in the Holy Spirit, has provided the miraculous process for each of us to

believe without seeing the Risen Jesus Christ. Returning, again, to Thomas' passionate and committed declaration of "My Lord and my God!", let me further suggest his response of faith is a good example for us.

Last Sunday – Easter Sunday, near the close of the 9:15 a.m. "The Event" – of our new Easter Celebration combining Food, Fellowship, and Worship, the plan was to show a powerful video by poet, David Bowden, entitled, "I believe in Jesus Christ". Unfortunately, we had technical problems and it was not shown. Demonstrating the same type of passion and commitment, which I believe was expressed by Thomas in our Reading, David Bowden's video provides a contemporary example of what passion and commitment in one's faith might look like today. Before showing it, let me mention I would have chosen a few different words in his poem or rap. Also, showing his testimony is not a blanket affirmation of everything he said. [The video, "*I Believe in Jesus Christ*" was shown.]

That was a passionate, committed, and powerful testimony! Since it strongly supports our God Is Still Speaking focus on God's Radical and Extravagant Forgiveness, Invitation, and Welcome, let me restate part of Bowden's testimony. He said, "**I believe in Jesus, the Forgiver of Men, since Man would not come to God, God came to them. Though we spit in His face through our arrogance and sin, holiness became flesh and said, 'It was forgiven.'**" As I have said in previous messages, our Divine Parent sent God's Only Son into this world to prove to us that our Creator Forgives us, Invites us into a New Faith Relationship with the Almighty, and Welcomes us into it. The stubbornness of human beings is the source of why God's Agape Love for us had to be demonstrated through the Son of God's death and resurrection! Indeed, supporting this view is our Scripture's report in vs. 21-23, "*Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.' Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'*" We believers are given the authority to forgive people's sins through God's Gift of the Holy Spirit! There is no requirement a "sinner" must fulfill special Old Testament or other laws. Jesus Christ calls us to go to others with the Good News of God's Agape Love shown in God's Son and to announce and demonstrate God's Forgiveness, Invitation, and Welcome.

Supporting that call, our first video declared, "The redemptive power that came alive in Christ's Resurrection is as powerful and alive today as it was then. When God works in and through our lives Easter Happens. When we invite the stranger, when we help the poor, when we visit the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, or bring peace to those whose hearts are troubled, Easter Happens."

Also supporting our call, Bowden declared in his video, "His hands and feet are now the church – his timeless narrative confession. This is our heritage – they are our relatives and this is our confession: we believe in Jesus Christ his death, burial, and resurrection." A little later he concluded, "I believe in Jesus Christ – the rallying cry of our eternal obsession."

In case we wonder, if we can be as passionate and committed as the Disciple Thomas or even as David Bowden revealed, the first video promises our unity with that first Easter experience, saying, "Whatever excitement and exuberance we experienced on Easter Sunday, is alive and present and available every day, every hour, every second. Low Sunday, I don't think so because Easter keeps happening."

"Easter keeps happening" – you and I can also be passionate and committed to our faith in God and the Risen Jesus Christ, the Son of God! Trust in God's Agape Love and let the Holy Spirit empower you to reach out to others with God's Forgiveness, Invitation, and Welcome. I Believe! Do you? Amen.