

**THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**April 19, 2020; 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year A**

**FIRST SCRIPTURE READING**                      1 Peter 1:3-9

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup> In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup> so that the genuineness of your faith--being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup> Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup> for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

**2<sup>ND</sup> SCRIPTURE READING**                      John 20:19-31

<sup>19</sup> 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 [what or who might be outside], Jesus came and stood among them and said, "**Peace be with you.**" <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "**Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.**" <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "**Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.**"

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> 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."

<sup>26</sup> 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.**" <sup>27</sup> 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.**" <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" <sup>29</sup> 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.**"

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> 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.

**SERMON**                                      *L'Chaim!*                                      Rev. Martin McGeachy

As I said to the kids this morning, I've always felt like Doubting Thomas got a bad rap historically, saddled with a negative moniker for one moment of his life. Like paparazzi waiting to catch celebrities in a bad moment, little did Thomas know that day the Gospel writers were taking notes. Luckily, no phone cameras were around. Read

up on Thomas. There are other places in the Bible where he is brave and faithful. And honestly, like Tommy-Boy, I'm also a skeptic and doubter in the midst of a very deep faith. Come on, who isn't? People who never have doubts scare the living daylights out of me. People who never doubt themselves can and will do great damage to those around them. I doubt myself a lot, I doubt what I'm told, including about my religion, without back-up or proof, and I doubt just about everything I read on the Internet unless I've investigated it. That's why God gave us brains. What I don't doubt, never have, is that Love Wins. I believe that, and I believe that sums up the Bible. Love Wins. Even though it doesn't seem that way, even though we can't always see it. There's where my faith comes in. If I don't see it, it's because I'm not looking correctly. Remember, the root word for *skeptic* is *to see, look at*.

Jesus doesn't in any way criticize Thomas; he merely blesses those who believe even without proof. Because in the end, in this life, unless Jesus appears to us in a vision, or the end times come and we behold him in the flesh, we will have no proof. But we still study, and examine, and search, because that can bring us into faith. And belief isn't enough in and of itself. (Gasp!) Did I say that? Yes. I love to repeat the old saying, "I believe in brussels sprouts, but I never intend to eat one." Belief in and of itself is meaningless without Christ's meaning to make it live. There are plenty of denominations that preach faith and belief—and hatred, bigotry, misogyny and xenophobia.

Don't believe without examining what and why you believe. The entire point of the Bible is this, explicitly stated in John 31: But these [things] 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*. His name is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Mother; The Prince of Peace. His name is sacrifice, humility, grace, mercy.... These are the names that bring life, to us and to the world. We're called not to believe, but to believe our way into Life. And Life in that context isn't unhappiness, misery, or mere existence. It is the ability to live in abundance, joy and rejoicing, no matter what the circumstances. As Jesus says elsewhere, I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

A reminder, in these times of uncertainty, when grocery store shelves are empty, and pocketbooks are empty, and the unemployment lines are full, even when six feet apart—abundance isn't earthly wealth. Abundance doesn't mean rich and famous. That's abundant meaninglessness in the Spirit world. You know the old joke about the man who died and met St. Peter at the Pearly Gates, but instead of going in, said to Pete, "My life was so rich and abundant, I can't bear to leave it behind. Can't I bring some of it into heaven?" Against Peter's better judgement, after much pleading by the man, he said to him, "All right, you can go home and bring back one suitcase full." Soon the man returns, and St. Peter opens up the suitcase to see that it's gleaming with solid gold bars, and he says to the man, "You brought paving with you?"

Sure, that's easy for me to say when I have a full belly, living in privilege. Today, I have a job. Is it hollow to preach life when people are dying or hungry or unemployed? No,

that's when we need the promise most of all. *I promise this day you will be with me in paradise*, said the Lord on the cross. On the cross. In this world there will be suffering; the Bible acknowledges that over and over, and Jesus knows it even better than we; and we are called to rejoice even then. That doesn't necessarily mean dance and sing and twirl rainbow ribbons, although if someone wants to do that and send me a video I will totally work it into next week's sermon—to rejoice is to believe, even when times are tough, that Love wins. That God's got this, and we have to trust in God for big picture, the long haul. That brings the Peace that Jesus breathes onto the disciples behind their locked doors of fear and persecution. Peace is the first word of the risen Lord to his followers.

In our reading from 1Peter, Peter writes, "Know that in your suffering, Christ also suffered and suffers still with you; so rejoice even in your suffering, knowing that the end is near and that glory awaits." The early church expected the Second Coming of Christ imminently, so Peter's promise of coming joy was to be in the next life, but we who have watched and waited for over two thousand years know that while that promise awaits, Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly; and the promise is still true in this life. Rejoice, even in suffering, for joy awaits. And maybe today is the day. This too, shall pass, and joy is ours in Jesus Christ. Whether our suffering is acute or chronic, it does not last forever, and the promise of joy is ours. Jesus says in John 16:33, "[I want you to have peace.] In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" Love wins.

We have to keep on keeping on, taking the next right step, even when it feels like we're slogging through mud, and even when we're full of questions. Because if we can persevere, we will reach the promised land. There's a saying in 12-step programs for struggling newcomers, "Don't leave before the miracle happens."

Locked doors cannot hold Christ. A sealed tomb cannot keep him in. A world-wide virus can't stop his Life from spreading throughout the world, and into the next world as well.

As Peter says, <sup>3</sup> *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ....* Born again. To Life, Le Chaim. Sorry—you know I can't resist a good showtune. Remember Fiddler on the Roof?

To life, to life, l'chai-im!  
L'chai-im, l'chai-im, to life!  
One day it's honey and raisin cake,  
Next day a stomach ache, Drink L'chai-im, to life!

Our great men have written words of  
Wisdom to be used  
When hardship must be faced;  
Life obliges us with hardship

So the words of wisdom  
shouldn't go to waste.

To us and our good fortune  
Be happy be healthy, long life!  
And if our good fortune never comes  
Here's to whatever comes, Drink l'chaim, to life!

*(Fiddler on the Roof, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, & book by Joseph Stein)*

The peace and joy of Christ, the rejoicing, isn't the same thing as happiness. It's assurance. Belief that God of Love has this. My father once described "**J.O.Y.**" as consisting of three ways of loving:

- 1 - Loving **Jehovah** (God).
- 2 - Loving **Others** (Neighbor).
- 3 - Loving **Yourself** (Self).

Rejoice, in all things, choose life. Seek, and ye shall find. Ye shall find life if ye open thine eyes and ears to it. Peace be with you. Whether you're behind locked doors, or you're sealed in the tomb and facing death, your own or your loved ones. To Life. Peace. Whether your job is secure, whether you're on a diet and there are too many carbs haunting you from the refrigerator all day long, or you're hungry, and frightened, and have lost your job. Nothing can keep the risen Lord out. Peace to you. Life. Love Wins. Believe it. Le Chaim.

Amen.