

I hope you were here celebrating Easter last Sunday. I am sure there was uplifting choir music, youth and children having an egg hunt, people dressed up in bright and floral spring outfits. This and every other Christian sanctuary was filled with an atmosphere of celebration.

I attended a Disciple of Christ church in Torrance myself last Sunday. It was a joy to witness my granddaughter stepping up to participate in Children's moment there, and be sitting with my son's family in church. All this celebration in churches almost made the story of Easter make sense...

On that Sunday we talked of resurrection and new life, new hope. You could get into it, know it, sing and say the words. He is Risen, Alleluia, He is risen, indeed.!

...faith was easier that day. But then it was Monday, Tuesday... Many of you had to go back to your routine, to work, school, doing laundry and keeping appointments, which had been put off until after Easter. I had to drive north with my dog through lots of rain to get home. It was bumper to bumper in LA with commuters trudging off to work. The mood shifted away from all the celebration. The trumpets and alleluias of Easter seem a distant memory..

On top of that, the very first Sunday after Easter we are faced with a crisis of faith by one of the disciples. Many of us have heard today's text described as the story of "doubting Thomas". But that may not be fair to Thomas. He isn't so much a doubter, as he is, at least three things in my view. He may have been a realist, someone who didn't believe in what went against nature, where death is the end of life. Or, Thomas might have been called, in what educational circles call "a hands on learner". He wanted concrete proof of the Easter miracle. Nothing wrong with that, I know many of us learn this way. .

I am one that loves fabric stores and I need to touch the material to really see the color, know its weight, find it's texture. Woodworkers are like that, Jim Laflin would attest to that, needing to touch and feel to really know about the wood he is holding and planning to mold.

2.

Thomas may have been a touchy-feely kind of guy. It could have been an endearing quality for him to want to be close to Jesus physically, and touch his wounds. A loving gesture.. Let us remember there have been doubters in faith through all time. Our own John Wesley claimed he doubted his faith until his ‘heart was strangely warmed.’”

Seeing is believing is what we are used to. But here is the risen Christ, resurrected, appearing to his friends saying “blessed are those who have not seen me and yet believe”.

Faith-Belief-fact, so elusive, especially in a world that values tangible proof. Even the Gospel writers differ in their accounts of the empty tomb of Jesus, The stories of the appearances differ...and yet, what we come away with is the certainty that **something transforming occurred after Jesus died on the cross, and the disciples, then and now have never been the same. I believe that. I can wrap my head around the events of Easter when something happened that changed Jesus’ friends. I even believe that in each Easter since there is the possibility for transformation within each one of us to feel the presence of Jesus Christ within our midst.**

I believe that people in this church were transformed on Easter, with or without the Alleluias and lilies in the service. There is something more, something that intrudes into our lives, if we let it, Where Christ can become real to us, when we can get up close and personal with the living God.

I’ll never forget, once When I served as a guest preacher in Round Valley, ever been up there? In this United Methodist church, way up near Latonville and the Eel River, there is a small congregation of mostly Native Americans who are faithful followers of Christ. Their church has been around since the 1860s. There are only about 25 of them left and they have no ordained pastor, but they get guest speakers and pastors from all over the county. During the week before Easter weekend there had been a death in the community, a Native American man was killed by a sheriff’s officer. There was racial tension, bad feelings and unrest in the valley.

3.

I came on the scene, Sunday morning, uncertain of how the mood of the people would receive me. I had prepared a message that was up-beat and celebratory for Easter. Something unusual happened that morning. God intruded on that service. You see, the lectionary reader stood up with his Bible opened to the empty tomb passage, and walked to the front of the little church. A light breeze came through the room and the pages of the bible flipped to another book of the Bible. The man began reading the top of that page, unknowing anything changed and he read words from a Zechariah 14 text depicting fierce justice, redemption, protection from the Lord. These were strong words, solid religion for people who had been treated unjustly. I could feel the change in the room. The people's pain had been addressed by this scripture, their anger was avenged by the God of the Old Testament that day. They were transformed.

I was a bit rattled myself and changed my message, on the spot! As a matter of fact, I felt called to speak on what I felt going on in the room. I stood up and paraphrased the text and asked those who wished to speak up and tell of their experience, their feelings about the murder in their community. Many spoke, shared what was on their heart, they appreciated an opening, a safe place to talk about what had happened. The canned speech I had brought was not what was needed for these people, that day.

After the service, many came to me saying "thank you for picking that Scripture passage. It was just what we needed". I told them it was the Holy Spirit that flipped those pages of the Bible to the reading that the people needed. There was a transforming moment in church that day. Easter came that day without the story, without lilies or egg hunts.

This last year, I have been participating in Palo Alto First Methodist. It actually was my childhood church and is located directly across the street from my parent's home, where I grew up. Now, my brother lives there. As a kid, I started walking across the street to church with a neighbor girl in third grade. We were in the choir, went to church camp, fed the Pastor's pets at the parsonage, when they were away.

4.

Neither of my parents or my brother ever came across the street to go to church, see me in the choir or anything. They had no interest and were skeptics. But when I look back at old photos of me, I see Easter pictures of me all dressed up, with new shoes, dress, purse, a hair cut, all ready to go to church with my neighbor. My parents had taken time to buy me clothes to wear, given me coins to place in the offering plate, allowed me to go to camp, and other youth activities all those years, even though they were not interested.

Both my parents died long before I ever decided to go to seminary to become a pastor. I don't know what they would have thought about it, but I do know that whether or not they wanted to, they paved the way, made it possible, for me to go in that direction because of their actions in my childhood. While my parents doubted the church, God was working in me through them, drawing me toward faithfulness in Christ.

To be met by the living God is a bit frightening, for it means that our God will not be locked in the past, will not be imprisoned in history, or within our limited notions of what God can or cannot do. Jesus is raised. Jesus is raised with or without doubt. With or without trumpets and banners, lilies or egg hunts.

Jesus is raised each and every time we allow Christ to come into our hearts, to transform us from the ordinary daily life to a new understanding that Easter is not a hope of our own creation. Today we are talking about a stunning intrusion into the way we usually do business, allowing us to see and feel Christ's presence in our lives by how our lives are intruded upon. Take a look at the twists and turns of your own life. Where was Christ present, even when you doubted. Alleluia, Amen.

Sermon Preached by Rev. Karen Paulsen
April 12, 2015
Campbell United Methodist Church.