

April 18, 2021
Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 3:12-19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48

Wondering in Joy

By the Rev. Tom Garrison

Do you ever **wonder** whether churches like ours will survive? Survive not just the Pandemic, but the indifference and religious doubt of many people today?

I am a whole-hearted optimist on the survivability question, for reasons I will explain. The church will change; it may look very different, but with God's help—and yours—I want to say up front that I believe all will be well.

To understand why, I invite you to consider three words from our readings today, and you have already heard the first one: **Wonder**.

Hello, I'm Rev. Tom Garrison, a priest at Saints Martha & Mary Church in Eagan.

Since last March, our doors have been mostly closed because of COVID-19 precautions, and we have been meeting from our homes, joined together via Zoom to worship. It is a return to our roots some say.ⁱ

Those first followers of Jesus, following his death, rightly wondered whether they would ever survive. The devastated disciples gathered not by Zoom, but in a single room; then Jesus, himself, amazingly stood among them following his Resurrection. They could not believe their eyes even when he said, "touch me and see."

His followers were simultaneously frightened and overjoyed. They were, "disbelieving and still wondering," we are told. There's that word again. In fact, wonder shows up not just in our gospel, but also in our readings from Acts and in our Psalm today.

That is one of the things that *I love best* about the Episcopal Church—that it is OK to wonder, to question, to reason & have doubts, even to be wrong about things.ⁱⁱ Peter denied Christ three times. Peter was the one who Jesus once told to, "Get behind me Satan," and yet, Peter was still the rock upon which Jesus chose to build his church.

Now a rock is not the prettiest thing in creation or the smartest, notes Frederick Buechner, “but watch out if it gets rolling,” he says. WATCH OUT IF IT GETS ROLLING.ⁱⁱⁱ Who better than Peter to let the Israelites know that even though they acted in ignorance allowing their leaders to put Jesus to death—even then—it was not too late to repent. Do you ever stop to think that our own sins, our own ignorance are stops us from discovering wonder, from starting that rock of righteousness rolling downhill? And it is not too late for us, even now, to change our ways. Why?

The dictionary definition of wonder reminds us the word also has a positive connotation: *a feeling of surprise . . . caused by something beautiful, unexpected, or inexplicable*. Let us wonder this day about what wonderful transformation God has in mind for us, and for God’s Church, and invite the spirit into all our wonderings about the way forward in faith.

If wonder is the first word, the second word or phrase that stands out for me in these readings is —***Peace be upon you***. It leads me to a question: What do you miss most about the way you worshiped pre-Pandemic? For many, the immediate answer last spring was Communion; not being able to share the bread and wine in community was devastating, and yet we carry on.

Today’s gospel lesson reminds me that what I’ve missed even more in the Eucharist is the passing of the Peace. Oh sure, we still do it via Zoom with a wave, a peace sign, a namaste bow, but it’s just not the same for me.

In Jesus’ appearance before the 11, he gave them the ancient Hebrew greeting, “Shalom Aleichem”—*Peace be upon you*.^{iv v}

Luke’s gospel gives us no indication of a verbal response from the disciples to receiving the Peace, much less a handshake, or our expression in reply—“and also with you.” But it is that direct physical expression in warm greeting of another that I miss.

One wonders whether we will ever shake hands again. Dr. Anthony Fauci doesn’t think we should.^{vi} Maybe we should just put our hand over our heart in greeting like some Middle Eastern countries do, or let our eyebrows flash up and down—the custom in Samoa.^{vii}

Whether new practices will evolve is unknown, but let’s find a way to underscore the importance of exchanging the peace with each other, and with the stranger.^{viii} Because, in the Christian context I offer my hand in peace be as a sign that YOU are a person worthy of my risking a handshake with.^{ix}

And unlike the disciples, let's recognize we have the peace to carry on in uncertain times, without all the answers. You see, when Jesus said, "Peace be with you," that wasn't enough for the doubting disciples. As one named Thomas, I appreciate this passage in Luke, because ALL of those assembled get the blame for doubting, not just Thomas. Jesus shows them his hands and feet, but that still wasn't enough proof. So, he asked for and ate some food.

Luke and Acts were not written down until at least five decades *after* Christ's death, and by then some different belief systems were cropping up in some cities and house churches. Like those who denied Jesus actually came in the flesh, or actually suffered on the cross. They said he only *appeared* to be human.^x

So that is where the eyewitness testimony of the women and men who actually saw the resurrected Jesus is especially important. And Jesus eating in front of them would certainly be one way to prove that this was not just some sort of appearance or vision.

The word "**witnesses**" is the final one I want us to consider today. It is in both the reading from Acts and Luke's gospel. Witnesses, plural, implies something we do not do alone. It reminds us that it is up to us—all of us—to keep the Church alive. Our catechism reminds us that lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons—all of us—are the ministers of the church. All of us must be its witnesses.^{xi}

We also use the singular form of that word a lot in the Bible and in life. Thou shalt not bear false witness is one of the 10 Commandments. When it's really important for us to be believed, we might say, "As God is my witness..."^{xii}

The reading from Acts comes just after Peter and John had healed a lame man in Jerusalem, but the great theology professor Willie James Jennings says the miracle here is not just the person who had been restored to perfect health, but Peter & John "who now live on the other side of the journey as [Christ's] true witnesses."—endquote.^{xiii}

Think about it. The future of the Church once turned on four fishermen, a tax collector, a tent-maker—these are the imperfect people just like us that Christ chooses to carry out his work along with the women at the tomb.^{xiv} And then, by the time John dies, who was thought to be the last surviving disciple of the original 12, "there was no one left on earth who knew, [who] saw with his [own] eyes, said the poet Browning. And how will it be, he asked, when no one is left to say, "I saw?"^{xv}

I get it. When so many people today say they are not affiliated with any church, when many of my own kids either do not believe, or do not believe enough to be in Christian community with

others, when the Pandemic has further eroded attendance and increased worries over finances, I get it that doubts about the future arise.

Like the Psalmist we lament, oh that we might see better times.^{xvi} But remember what Christ said, what Christ did. He equipped his disciples to go out and witness to the love of the Lord, to proclaim the forgiveness of sins, to share the Peace that passes all understanding.

And while we today may not have been eyewitness to the actual resurrection event, let us recall what Jesus said. “Blessed are those who have NOT seen and yet believed.”^{xvii}

We, too, are commissioned to make a difference, to go out and be servants to a world that is suffering.^{xviii} The God of Wonder wants us to ask questions, to get to the bottom of things but then act. He equipped his disciples even when they had doubts. And it is a wonderful thing, this love the Father has given us. May the God of Love (and wonder) lead us *beyond* our doubts to do what is right, to love with the innocent love of children.^{xix} As God is my witness, we have been given everything we need to be children of light, to have hope in him who was, and is, and is to come.^{xx}

Will our beloved church change? Absolutely, but God’s got this if God’s got us. All will be well.

Peace be with you!

Amen.

ⁱ The early worship of what became Christianity often began in small, so-called “house churches.” When folks began meeting in Eagan, MN in 1987 to form the first new Episcopal church in Minnesota in 20 years, they met in a local home of sorts—a funeral home. And in Zoom, of course, there are “Zoom Rooms” in which one can chat.

ⁱⁱ Reason is one of the legs of the 3-legged stool (along with Scripture and Tradition) advanced by Richard Hooker, an English priest in the Church of England, considered one of the most influential English theologians of the sixteenth century. In more recent times, a fourth leg is said to be Experience, as advanced by the Very Rev. John E. Booty. See: *What Makes Us Episcopalians*, Church Publishing House, 1982. Booty was professor of church history at the Episcopal Theology School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechener, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, HarperOne, 1979, p. 151.

^{iv} There were only 11 disciples there. Judas, who turned Jesus in to the authorities, was not present because, according to Matthew 27, Judas hanged himself when Jesus was led away to the cross.

^v “Shalom aleichem” (*shālôm ‘alêkem*) is the ancient and traditional greeting in among Jews throughout the world. The traditional Hebrew response is “unto you peace.” Its first recorded use is in the Scroll of Blessings for the First Month, which dates to at least 30 BCE, which means it was in use well before Christ was born. Similar phrases are found in Arabic (“peace be upon you”). “Dominus vobiscum” (The Lord be with you) was the Latin form of the greeting used by the Roman Catholic Church for many years, but the response was changed in 2011 to “And with your spirit.”

^{vi} “I don’t think we should ever shake hands again, to be honest with you,” said Dr. Anthony Fauci of the White House corona virus task force back in April 2020. The immunologist is head of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. 54% of Americans questioned, in one survey, agreed with Fauci’s statement.

^{vii} For an interesting take on the handshake controversy see Paleo-Anthropologist Ella Al-Shamahi's article. (<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/mar/21/after-covid-we-will-shake-hands-again-says-ella-al-shamahi-it-is-part-of-our-dna>) Far from being a relatively modern gesture, she believes the handshake is in our very DNA and may be 7 million years old dating to our Neanderthal ancestors. There are interesting stories of tribes, particularly in New Guinea, who had no known contact with the outside world who engaged in handshaking when first meeting strangers. While others predict the demise of the handshake, Al-Shamahi does not.

^{viii} Some Hebrew scholars say that the peace that was offered was of a particular kind, involving justice and the proper treatment of others, which is why greeting the stranger and not just the friend is vital.

^{ix} In the Middle Ages it is thought that handshaking was a way to observe if the stranger had a weapon beneath his cloak, and Fr. Joe Hopwood observes that right now, sadly, our human hands can be bacteria-bearing weapons during COVID-19. That said, the world has survived plagues and pandemics before, and extending the peace was a sign of trust in another. At Ss. Martha and Mary, even pre-pandemic, we have had hand sanitizer.

^x Look up "Docetism" as one example of a heresy that the early church was trying to address. One wonders what the heresies of our time would be, that we don't "need" God anymore? That we can be spiritual and not religious?

^{xi} *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 855 in answer to the question, "Who are the ministers of the Church?"

^{xii} Additional examples would be the 5th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which says a witness cannot be compelled to testify against themselves, the Latin phrase in the law, that says, "a single witness is no witness," and in the plural, the "great cloud of witnesses" referred to Hebrews 12:1, the saints who testify to God's faithfulness as we run the race (of life and faith) with patience. See also Acts 1:8 (NRSV): "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem . . . and to the ends of the earth."

^{xiii} Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, part of the *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* series, Westminster John Knox Press, 2017, p. 42. Jennings also cites the danger of using passages in Acts to justify mistreatment of our Jewish brothers and sisters. All of us can act in ignorance.

^{xiv} The "once turned" phrase is not original to me, but I do not have the source for it.

^{xv} *A Death in the Desert*, by Robert Browning, about the disciple John. See: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43752/a-death-in-the-desert-56d222942c57c> . The relevant stanza is:

"Still, when they scatter, there is left on earth

"No one alive who knew (consider this!)

"—Saw with his eyes and handled with his hands

"That which was from the first, the Word of Life.

"How will it be when none more saith 'I saw'?"

^{xvi} Psalm 4:6

^{xvii} John 20:29

^{xviii} I love the description in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary "Although he [Jesus] may not appear in our midst to eat broiled fish, his presence is tangible in soup kitchens, around the kitchen table, and around the altar table . . . As in the first century so now the most convincing proof of the resurrection is in the daily testimony of the faithful that Christ still lives and the work of his kingdom continues." Abingdon Press, 2015, Vol. 8, P. 418.

^{xix} 1 John 3:1, 1 John 3:7

^{xx} Revelation 1:4 in slightly different order.

Special Note: As one who serves as part of a ministry team at Ss. Martha & Mary, I wish to acknowledge helpful insights received from my own informal "team of advisors" for this homily—The Rev. Tom Eklo, The Rev. Lindsay Hardin-Freeman, The Rev. Joe Hopwood, and The Rev. Jennifer Walding. Thank you, all.