

Whitefish UMC, 04/19/09, Second Sunday of Easter
John 20:19-31

Our Kind of Savior

How often it happens when we've lived through some terrible experience that we can't seem to erase the memory of it from our minds. Like Thomas, for example, the disciple of Jesus, known to his friends as Didymus, "The Twin." He must have been there on Golgotha, watching the horrible things the Roman soldiers did to Jesus, because a few days later, when his excited friends told him, "We saw the Master!" he refused to believe them. "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands," he said, "put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it (20:25b, Peterson)." That's the reaction of someone with PTSD. Even when he closed his eyes he could see the horror all over again.

It's why the derisive label of "Doubting Thomas" is so unfair. Thomas was no more of a doubter than were any of the rest of them. When Jesus first appeared to them saying, "Shalom! Peace be with you!" they all were still in shock. It took the sight of his wounded body to convince them too. So why pick on Thomas? He was traumatized by what he had seen. And he was honest enough to admit it.

Sometimes you and I go through things that are just too hard for us to bear, especially when they happen to people we cherish. And in those most terrible of times the cheerful reassurances of friends don't begin to touch the loss we are feeling. Maybe they can find reason to celebrate, but we can't. So don't let anyone climb onto our case because we refuse to settle for hearsay comfort. If God is real, God is going to have to prove God's self to us first hand.

But notice what happens to Thomas when he sets up these conditions. John reports that a week later Jesus appears to his followers again, and this time Thomas is with them. "Shalom everybody," Jesus says, just like he did before: "Peace to you." And then he turns to Thomas as if on a mission that reads his mind. "Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving. Believe (Peterson)."

And how does Thomas' react? Does he do as Jesus tells him? Does he reach out and feel and touch and satisfy his own stated demands for tactile verification now that he is given the opportunity? Not on your life! What he does is gasp out the most sweeping confession of faith in Jesus recorded of anybody anywhere in the whole New Testament: "My Lord and my God!" he says.

Up to this moment Thomas thought that if only he could see and touch Jesus' wounded body that would settle everything for him. But look at what happens when he's given the evidence: he doesn't make use of any of it because something else is already persuading his heart. It's the same evidence that has continued to persuade disillusioned, traumatized, grieving people ever since:

namely, the discovery that Jesus' life and teachings and death and resurrection invite us to pick up his work in the world after him and do that work in his name ourselves. That is to say, the moment people realize that Jesus is depending on us now to do his work with him in the world they discover that meaning is given back to their lives, and in that discovery they find that they begin to live in ways they've never lived before. And that's the resurrection story that repeats itself over and over and over again. It repeats itself whenever disillusioned people like us face up to disillusionment and still refuse to separate themselves from the faith community that seeks to follow Jesus. Their original reasons for believing in Jesus may disappear in the process. But God has ways of meeting us in the gloom of our hearts, and as we cope with our disillusionment God has ways of restoring our joy and giving us a new sense of purpose and power.

Thomas missed out on the first Easter. His friends' experienced the risen Jesus without him. And when they told him about it he must have felt awful -- left out, excluded, unimportant, out of the circle -- in short, all of those feelings that you and I feel in our own gloomiest and most terrible times. But because he didn't leave the circle of people who were committed to trying to follow Jesus, in the midst of that circle he eventually heard Jesus speaking to him too, speaking personally, as if he, Thomas, were the most important person in the whole world. He heard Jesus singling him out as if everything had all been just for him. And isn't that the way the risen Jesus comes to everyone, giving us his work in the world to do?

Tradition has it that Thomas eventually got all the way to India for there exists there today a branch of Christianity known as the Mar Thoma Church, the Martyr Thomas Church. I have visited the church sanctuary under whose altar his body is said to be buried. Yes, Thomas the Twin, this disillusioned apostle, became the very first of Jesus' followers to discover that in that very room there not only was quite enough love for him, and quite enough love for all of his friends but for all of the world too! Thomas, the disillusioned apostle, the PTSD apostle, became the apostle of all the disillusioned people of earth.

So in his memory this morning I want to share with you two true stories of two American disciples of Jesus who in their own disillusionment made the same discovery that Thomas did. The first is the story of Julia Smith of Kentucky.

Julia believed in Jesus. As the year 1842 came to a close, she fully expected the end of the world because she was a follower of an apocalyptic Baptist preacher of those days, one William Miller, who had calculated the exact date. In anticipation of the event Julia had allowed the plants in her Connecticut home to go un-watered and die. She had even prepared her ascension robe to be worn at the Second Coming. But like 100,000 other Millerites she witnessed the fateful date come and go and was disillusioned. The Second Coming of Christ which they had so breathlessly awaited didn't happen. At first, for Julia

and all of her friends, it was the end of everything, the end of all of their hopes and dreams. Just imagine what that must have felt like.

But Julia refused to give in to her disillusionment. She drew the only conclusion that still made sense to her. The failure of Miller's prophecies must have been due to inadequate translation of the Bible. So she set about translating the Bible herself.

Yet ponder with me what that required of Julia. This woman, at age 55 already spoke fluent French like her grandparents. She had studied Greek at a local academy and had taken up Latin at age 14. But first she had to teach herself Hebrew. And after that she spent the next seven years of her life at the task of translating and becoming the first – and so far the only -- woman to translate the Old and New Testaments into English.

And then there was a political hurdle to leap over. For in 1872, the taxes of her sister Abby, the remaining member of the Smith family, were increased by a hundred dollars. Julia, by that time 80 years old, found that only she, her sister and two widows had been so assessed; no man had been similarly treated. Incensed, Abby complained at a town meeting, but the sisters received no relief. They refused to pay the unjust taxes, and the town elders seized seven of their eight cows to pay their debt. The sisters were shocked, mostly because their neighbors tried to take advantage of the situation at a town auction.

But the Smith sisters' tax protest made the newspapers. They became a cause célèbre of the women's suffrage movement. Souvenirs made from the hair of the Smith cows appeared as far west as Chicago. The original bill of sale for the famous cows was framed and exhibited as an "object of historical interest" at a Massachusetts Woman Suffrage Meeting. The *Springfield Republican* compared the Smiths to those American patriots who had protested England's taxation without representation.

And so it came about that in 1876, as America celebrated the centennial of the American Revolution, the Smith sisters celebrated their belief in the biblical mandate for justice by bringing forth *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments Translated Literally from the Original Tongues*, the translation that Julia had begun in response to her disillusionment over the Second Coming that hadn't happened almost 30 years earlier! In a letter accompanying the publication, suffragist leaders wrote, "We thought it might help our case to have known that a woman could do more than any man has ever done" –namely, translate the entire Bible without any man's assistance.

The second story has to do with Habitat for Humanity's founder Millard Fuller, the man who changed the face of philanthropy in America. You already know his name. Some of you may even have helped build a Habitat house, perhaps one of those right here in Whitefish. What you may not know, however,

is that the idea of Habitat for Humanity was born at Koinonia Farm, a Christian farming community founded in 1942 in rural southwest Georgia. It was founded by a Baptist farmer and theologian, Clarence Jordan, with the intent, as Jordan put it, to be a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.” It’s a farm where poor people lived and worked together, blacks and whites, in pre-civil rights America, and they still do.

What you also may not know is that devout Christians Millard Fuller and his wife Linda made their way to that “demonstration plot” in 1965 in a last-ditch attempt to save their marriage. It was a marriage that was crumbling under the stresses of Fuller’s million-dollar business ventures. They sold all that they owned and gave the money to the poor and began working on the farm alongside of other farm laborers. Fuller later said that the inspiration for Habitat for Humanity came from the Bible, starting with the injunction in Exodus 22:25 against charging interest to the poor. He spoke of the “economics of Jesus,” insisting that providing shelter to all was “a matter of conscience.” In face of his own disillusionment over success in business and a collapsing marriage Millard and Linda Fuller turned a simple idea into an international organization that now has helped more than 300,000 families move from deplorable housing into simple, decent homes they helped build and can afford to buy and live in. Just think about that!

When Millard Fuller died this past Feb. 3rd, he was buried in a plain pine box on Pine Hill at Koinonia Farm in a grave that bears no headstone. And all of this out of disillusionment over a marriage that was coming apart and the feeling that for him and Linda everything was over except the vision that the “economics of Jesus” was something that they together had both the gifts and the drive to do something about!

Thomas the Twin was the apostle of disillusionment. In the depths of his own anguish over seeing Jesus die, the risen Lord convinced him that it was all for him – the death and the resurrection – and then gave him his own work to do, along with the strength and the courage to go and do it.

Julia Smith and Millard Fuller heard the same commission and lived out the same story. And so have countless others -- apostles of disillusionment, all of them. By refusing to leave the community of those who follow Jesus they became in their own remarkable ways apostles of hope. And through their faithfulness the risen Christ has become a living presence all over the world.

Are you suffering from spiritual PTSD this morning? Amongst us here, in this very room, there’s quite enough love for all the world, and quite enough joy, and quite enough hope, and quite enough power, to chase away any gloom. For Jesus – Lord Jesus is in this very room. What’s keeping you from doing what you have both the vision and the drive to do something about in Jesus’ name?