



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon April 11, 2021 “Brave Thomas; Brave Us” Bruce Bennett

Let Us Pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to You, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

At our Bible Study via Zoom on Thursday evenings, we look at one of the scripture passages which will be included in the upcoming Sunday morning worship service.

David has expressed his gratitude during previous sessions from participants for allowing him to incorporate some of their contributions to Bible Study discussions into his sermons.

Since David had asked for a well-deserved break from sermon preparation for this Sunday and I offered to fill in, I looked forward to the same kind of help from this week’s Bible Study discussion.

For this session, David chose not the better known passage, the one about “Doubting Thomas,” but instead the lesser-known one, the one from the Acts of the Apostles which at first glance may sound like perfect harmony and like how fairy tales end, as in “they lived happily ever after.”

I confess that at my first glance, before our session started, I had that impression of it. Whoa, was I wrong!

It would take far too long to mention everything that everyone said that helped straighten me out, but here are just a few key things: First, several mentioned all of verse 32:

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”

Three people of the nine or ten in our group said they had lived in some kind of communal group in the past, and all three talked about how hard it was to “be of one heart and soul” when it came to making decisions, or even just having things go smoothly.

One of the three, Alice Barrett, commented that, in the translation we read first, there was no mention of being one in mind, but, she added, “the mind is where this story begins.” She went on to explain, “Consensus is very hard to reach but worth it. The challenge of this passage is here - acknowledging what you all hold in your hearts and trying to embody it.”

Then Berkeley McChesney said, “the power of one mind would make me feel uncomfortable.” And later, she said, (and I may not be quoting her exactly) “...to care for all, even those who are not of one heart, mind, and soul with us...[isn’t that what we are supposed to be about?]”

David asked this interesting question: “Are they of one heart because they are sharing everything, or are they sharing everything because they are of one heart?” David then observed that he tries not to infuse his sermons with politics, but so often he can’t help it, because so often the injustices of the present day call out for our church’s attention and response. He asked, “How can you not talk about politics and the economy with a passage like this?”

So David encouraged me to take what I liked from the Bible Study of the Acts passage and blend it in with the passage from John’s Gospel about Doubting Thomas. “Doubting Thomas” comes the week after Easter Sunday every year, chronologically as well as thematically, but why did the scholars who made up the Lectionary pair it with this seemingly unattainable “fairy tale” passage from Acts? What might we learn from looking at them together?

Well, David starts us off beautifully in our gathering prayer, first challenging the viability of us being able to sustain living “as one mind” or “one identity” but “rather to be and to live with a shared heart and in a shared light.

Then he takes us across the gulf to the Gospel passage, saying “As we answer this call, we also experience doubts: doubt that the peace you offer is really possible, that new life, new community is really possible. We hear the age-old stories, but we are filled with doubts about ourselves, and if we are honest, doubts about your Holy possibilities...and in the midst of doubts and worries, in the midst of fear, let us hear what you always quietly whisper: “Peace be with you.”

And as the Gathering Prayer comes to an end, he closes the circle by bringing us back to the Acts passage, with a passing reference to line 33: Let us accept the holy invitation, that reads simply “grace abounds.”

I could stop here and say our work here is done, but I would be betraying the promise in its title, which is not “Doubting Thomas; Doubting Us.” Rather, it is “Brave Thomas; Brave Us.”

Thanks to Rev. Kay Stenta for her blogpost entitled “Brave Thomas.”

The day before Bible Study, I mentioned to David that long ago I happened to have preached on the Doubting Thomas passage before, and that it was one of my favorite passages. I didn’t blame Thomas for needing to see the evidence before he would say he believed. I had seen that his circumstances were different than those of his fellow disciples.

But I told David also that I wasn’t satisfied with what I had already learned about Thomas, that I looked forward to going deeper and learning more. I’m glad I have had this second chance to take a deeper look. And I’m glad to have found more in my search. Since today is a Communion Sunday, I shouldn’t go on at great length, but I hope to pick out the most important pieces of this passage and what we might take from it.

The first thing that stands out is this: When Jesus first appeared in that locked house where the disciples were hiding in fear of the Jewish authorities, Thomas was not among them. This is well-known, but how much attention has been paid to the why of it?

Also, it says Thomas was called “The Twin.” Why is this mentioned?

First of all, some sources say that Thomas may have been a member of Jesus’s family, either a brother, or a cousin, or maybe a step-brother on Joseph’s side, from a prior marriage. Any of those associations might make the Jewish authorities target him even more aggressively than the other disciples. Some sources wonder if Thomas might have gone out specifically to look for Jesus. Adding to that, some sources speculate that Thomas might have borne a close physical resemblance to Jesus, making him even easier to spot, adding yet another dimension of risk. All these things suggest it may well have been very brave of Thomas to step out of that locked hideaway, for any reason.

Thomas found out upon his return about the appearance of Jesus in their hideaway because the other disciples told him, so it wasn’t a complete surprise to him when Jesus re-appeared the following week.

When Jesus returned, and Thomas was there, it was not so much Jesus’s words to Thomas that stand out for me, but rather it was Thomas’s words to Jesus, and his whole experience of it. Jesus tells him, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”

And Thomas [one imagines] kneels, peers, and gasps,
“My Lord [...] and My God!”

Jesus seems to want Thomas to see His scars, His healed wounds. Thanks to the Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay, who writes the weekly *Sermon Seeds* essays for the UCC, for her insights and quotes here.

The other disciples -- despite the Resurrection of Jesus, despite His visit and His having imparted the Holy Spirit upon them -- were hiding from His scars and theirs and cowering in fear of the unknown.

Likewise, most churches today have done the same thing. Rev. Lindsay says "The church is called to be in the world, but not of it, but has done the opposite, affirming the values and norms of the dominant culture at the same time retreating from being the hands, feet, voice, and heart of God in the world--the Body of Christ."

We can retreat from the Body of Christ in the world, or we can venture out in love and peace. Most of us may see ourselves in those disciples, blessed to be within the folds of this beautiful community but maybe not so much of one mind and heart and maybe not so ready to take as big a step as Thomas did. God loves us all, equally. And, "may we be, and live, with a shared heart and in a shared light."

"Peace be with us as we do the work of Jesus in the world.

Peace be with us as our witness to the love of God for all - and that means all.

Peace be with us as we speak up for the marginalized and oppressed.

Peace be with us as we love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Peace be with us as we pursue the newness of life in Christ.

Peace be with us as we embrace the vulnerability of our own scars...the marks of our resurrected lives."

Alleluia and Amen.