



Congregational Church of Burlington

Established 1774

April 2018

Pastor's Message

I write this pastor's message in preparation for what we clergy refer to as a "low Sunday", in this case, the Sunday after Easter. It has received this designation, along with the Sunday after Christmas, because the attendance on those Sundays is among the lowest of the year (excluding the Sundays in summer, which of course "don't count" for most Congregationalists).

There is great irony in the low attendance of the Sunday after Easter. For of all the Sundays of the year, it should be the most well attended. After all, if people really heard the good news of Easter, namely God's raising of Jesus from the dead, and the hope it gives us that we too will one day be raised, along with the risen living Christ who remains with us, shouldn't they be filled with the gratitude and joy that would make them want to come back to church to celebrate the good news? And yet many who came on Easter do not come back the next week. Is this because they only came out of duty, and not to celebrate their belief? Does this mean they really did not hear the good news amidst all the distractions of the day that were present in the worship service? Does it mean they heard and believed so much that they felt they didn't need to come until next Easter to hear the good news again? Does it mean that they simply got tired out from all the celebration and just needed to take a Sunday off, as is the case with many clergy? Or does it mean they really didn't believe what they heard and remain as skeptical as before.

Let's assume for a moment that disbelief and skepticism are the main reasons many people do not come back to church on the Sunday after Easter, rather than indifference or an inability and unwillingness to hear and accept the good news that was proclaimed. Now, I've always had a healthy respect for skeptics if their skepticism is genuine and born out of struggle, questioning and self-examination. Lest we are too critical of those whose skepticism will keep them away from church on the Sunday after Easter, and most Sundays after it, we need to remember that they have good company in Jesus' disciples themselves. None of Jesus' male disciples believed on that first Easter morning. When Mary Magdalene ran from the empty tomb and told them what she had found, only two of them bothered to check out her story. It was only when they returned to the tomb that they believed Mary; namely, that it was empty and not that Jesus had been resurrected (apparently forgetting, or not understanding Jesus' previous statements to them that he was to be crucified and raised in accordance with scripture). Even Mary Magdalene did not initially believe, even though she was the first to witness Jesus' tomb emptied, along with his resurrected body. So, for Mary, Peter, the beloved disciple, and Jesus' other male disciples, neither the empty tomb, nor Jesus' appearance in resurrected form led them to the belief that Jesus had been resurrected. Maybe Mary was blinded by her grief and the male disciples by fear, and even anger, that Jesus had left them. To Mary's credit, she did not recognize her risen Christ because she was looking to grieve someone who was dead, rather than celebrate someone who was alive. It was only after the resurrected Jesus called her by name, "Mary", that she was shaken enough out of her grief to recognize it was the resurrected Jesus who stood before her and addressed her. Mary's male counterparts also only came to their belief when the resurrected Jesus appeared to them, all except for Thomas, who needed even more concrete proof. Ever the skeptic and questioner, Thomas did not allow himself to be led to belief by the simple, and however powerful, testimony of those of his fellow disciples who said



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they had seen the resurrected Jesus before him, declaring, "unless I see his hands and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." It was only after this that Jesus finally appeared to him and said, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing," that Thomas declared, "My Lord and my God." Because the scripture does not say that Thomas actually did what Jesus challenged him to do, namely touching his wounds, maybe just seeing them was enough.

Now, maybe you are one of those faithful people who has never questioned or doubted or been skeptical about any aspect of your faith, even in times when it has been most sorely tested. I commend your faith and stand in awe of it and hold you in great respect. As Jesus did when he said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe." As for me, I've been a questioner all my life. I guess you could say it's part of my nature. It's something I was encouraged to do by my father growing up, and by my best teachers in school; and sometimes this led me to be skeptical of certain things. Maybe that's why I've always related to Jesus' disciples after that first Easter. Maybe you do too, because you are like me and them, at least in certain moments of your life. But, I am heartened by the fact that Jesus hears our questions and does not abandon us in our skepticism. That maybe he even values it and respects it and comes to us as he came to Mary, his male disciples and Thomas, appearing to them in the most common of ways, calling out their names and even inviting the most literal among them to touch his wounds and share in his woundedness.

I would like to believe, and I do believe, that Jesus is doing the same for us today, even the most questioning and sometimes skeptical among us. That he appears to us in the most common ways and forms, like in a cemetery gardener, or in the faces of the poor, the hungry, the thirsty and the imprisoned; in the woundedness of others; or in the joyful play of children. Maybe, like Mary, we just don't recognize what is in front of us because we are looking for a dead Jesus instead of a living Christ. And if what we see still will not lead us to belief, maybe touching, and being touched by the wounds of others, will. If that still won't, maybe hearing Jesus call out our names in love, and concern in the wind, or in the silence of the darkness, will.

So, my friends, question, and be skeptical, if you will, but look, and listen. Maybe what you see and hear will bring you back to church to celebrate and give thanks.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Wendell Taylor".

Wendell M. Taylor, Pastor