

“Rise Strong”

John 20:19-31

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Rev. Dr. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

If the joy of Easter is yours, how do you define the meaning of Easter in a sentence? In short, how will you explain the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection? I am not expecting to hear your immediate answer, but I hope that you will take time to find your own answer. “Resurrection means that Christ has risen and he continues to be with us and go with us at all times!” The event of resurrection spiritually testifies that the love of God is more powerful and stronger than the power of Evil. Death cannot separate us from the love of God. No matter what barriers hinder us from trusting in God, Christ will always be with us and go before us! God invites us to follow Christ Jesus trusting in the love of God. This is the essence of resurrection and all about Easter in Christian faith! Therefore, Easter should not be an event to commemorate God’s power to resurrect, rather it should be our individual spiritual challenge to practice our own “resurrection.”

There has been a spiritual voice lingering in my mind these last two weeks. “Jeong, I am risen. Will you rise with me?” The voice was gentle but very clearly echoes in my heart on and on. It hasn’t diminished, rather it challenges me. Hmm...what is it? First part seems to be easy. I can say “Yes, God.” I shout out joyfully, “*Christ is risen, and he is risen indeed!*” but what about the other sentence? You may react with questions like “How do I rise with Christ Jesus?” “What does it really mean to ‘rise’ with Christ?” This morning, I challenge you to take these questions to grow and strengthen your faith. For the next a couple of weeks, I am going to preach with the theme Rise Strong through practicing “resurrection”. This morning, I invite you to learn the first lesson from one of Jesus’ disciples Thomas, especially his personal experience with the risen Christ.

In Church history, Thomas has been an example of “question-asker” or negatively known as “the doubter of faith.” When most of the disciples gladly accepted Jesus as their risen Christ, Thomas wouldn’t believe him at first. He wanted to see Jesus and to put his hand into the nail hole of Jesus’ body. Why did Thomas want to see the nail holes in Jesus’ body? There is one important thing that we need to remember in the story: Thomas’s doubt and act to touch his master’s nail mark was not intended to deny or refuse the risen Christ. He humbly desired to accept the risen Christ through his eyes and physical touch. Let me ask you a question. What really triggered Thomas to restore his faith? It happened when he touched Jesus’ deep wounds with his hand. By this, he really

was able to be connected back to the love of God. The point of our story is that *Jesus offered his wounded body as a powerful way to testify his love and the love of God*. Indeed, Jesus helped Thomas in his unbelief. Think about this question seriously: *Who wounded Jesus?* Jesus Christ, Son of God was hung on the cross and died because of the heavy weight of the brokenness in us. Thomas realized his brokenness when he touched Jesus' wounds. That moment made him turn around and confess, "My Lord, my God." His nail mark and hole was a powerful physical proof for God's grace and gift to us.

Questions and doubt are natural human learning processes. Without questions, there will be no progress and creativity. Psychologically speaking, doubt comes to us when we can't be absolutely positive what is going to happen. This kind of emotion has something to do with fear, deep despair and disappointment in failing to fulfill our expectation. Thomas was one of the disciples who followed Jesus with all his heart and mind as his Messiah. Imagine his feeling when he heard that his Messiah was killed on a cross in a defenseless way. He must have dealt with betrayed feelings, frustration within himself or feelings of abandonment, "being left alone". If these feelings came to him hurting as wounded heart, it could be a natural reaction and make sense for us to understand Thomas reaction. Thomas might have expected condemnation when he took a risk to touch his master's nail marks. But Jesus accepted Thomas and his doubt as they were. Jesus embraced Thomas' doubt and uncertain heart. In the same way, God loves us as we are as did Jesus love for Thomas. Whoever you are either a doubter or questioner, God accepts you as you are.

Let us continue to reflect upon the meaning of Jesus' nail marks and hole. When Thomas touched his master's wounded body, I imagine that it instantly touched his deep soul as a powerful way to wash away and rid his sin. He experienced the power of God's love to heal him. Every time I break the bread at communion, I am reminded of Jesus' broken body as a symbol of 'brokenness' in us and around us. Last Friday, our denomination's top court, the Judicial Council, made a final decision on the first openly gay Bishop Karen Oliveto's election. The Council decided that it was an act about Homosexuality in the church law. Simply it means that our denomination wouldn't accept gay people as elected Bishops and ordained pastors. We just experienced another piece of brokenness and schism in our church. It is time to pray for unity of our church, healing our brokenness, and hurt in us. The church needs to touch Jesus' wounded body and reconnect to the power of God's healing and love.

Ironically, the doubt that Thomas had was not about Jesus. It was about himself. Thomas doubted Jesus and did not open himself up to Jesus, because

he wasn't sure what was happening to him. When he realized that Jesus brought peace with a forgiving spirit, he confessed that Jesus was his Lord and God. Thomas expected condemnation. While the disciples abandoned him and turned away from him, Jesus never abandoned them. Rather he appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you" When Jesus said, "peace be with you" he meant that we should not doubt. We should believe!! We should not worry about us, but trust in God and power of resurrection. Then Christ will be with you and bring you healing and peace.

Jesus Christ invites all of us to touch his wounds, to believe in him and power of resurrection as a sign of God's ongoing presence. In this season of Easter, it is my hope that you will find and receive the healing power for the broken pieces in our lives, church, society and in this world. Christ is risen. Amen.