

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
April 16, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
Second Sunday after Easter**

**“Peace Be with You”
Christian Scripture: John 20:19-31**



“Christ Shows Himself to Thomas” by Rowan LeCompte and Irene LeCompte in the Washington Cathedral in Washington, D.C.

Jesus first appeared to his disciples on the evening of first day of the week after the resurrection. For whatever reason, Thomas was not there. Perhaps he was the disciple sent to get dinner as there were no Uber meals, Grub Hub, or Domino’s pizza delivery that brought provisions to the hide-out. When Thomas arrived with dinner, Peter asked Thomas if he remembered to get the Diet Coke. (Now, if you don’t remember Teddy reading that, you are right; he did not. The part about the Diet Coke is in the gnostic Gospel according to Thomas that we did not read this morning.) After Thomas distributed the food, the disciples basically

exclaimed to Thomas, “You missed it!” “Missed what?” Thomas asked. The disciples replied, “You missed Jesus. He was just here”. Thomas, munching on his pepperoni pizza, understandably replied, “Yeah, right. I will believe it when I see it”.

This Monday evening for Pub Theology, over a beer, or like Thomas, a Diet Coke, we are going to discuss ‘the resurrection’. You see, many in our modern world understandably have difficulty with a belief in the physical, or ‘bodily’, resurrection of Jesus. And many of us who are ‘orthodox’ Christians have difficulty with a disbelief in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ lest we be considered ‘unfaithful’, like Thomas. Hence, Thomas is often unfairly dubbed ‘Doubting Thomas’.

I believe Thomas’ appellation as ‘Doubting Thomas’ is unfair, because until they saw the resurrected Jesus, *all the disciples*, and even Mary who went to the tomb, at first ‘doubted’.¹ All of the disciples only came to believe once they had seen the risen Jesus. In fact, many of the disciples doubted when told by the women who did report of an empty tomb. So, Thomas really is no worse than any other follower of Jesus. Rather than seeing Thomas as a doubting figure, I prefer to see Thomas as like any of the other disciples and like any of us. Notice that

¹ Cheryl Lindsay, “Peace Be with You”, *Sermon Seeds*, United Church of Christ, found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-peace-be-with-you-2/>, accessed April 16, 2023.

Jesus did not chastise or condemn Thomas.² On the contrary, Jesus provided Thomas exactly what Thomas needed, or that for which he asked! Jesus appeared to Thomas' friends. Thomas simply desired the same! Who could blame him? And Jesus graciously and lovingly and even tenderly acceded to Thomas' request. Jesus greeted Thomas and pronounced a blessing of 'peace' with the others.

I believe what Thomas and the disciples were provided, and I believe we are all provided, is not exclusively a visual and tangible proof of a bodily resurrection, but rather *evidence and proof of the transcendent and thus evidence of a life-transforming power*. Let me repeat that, Jesus gave Thomas and the disciples evidence and proof of the transcendent and its life-transforming power. And that evidence and proof is not limited to a physical resurrection. The evidence and proof of that which is transcendent and life-transforming is shown to us in a myriad of ways and on many occasions. If you doubt me, remember Jesus' words to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet [also] believed". Jesus essentially said to Thomas, 'I appear to you now as evidence of the transcendent and that which is beyond you changes lives! But blessed are others who may not see me, yet who also come to believe

² Cheryl Lindsay, "Peace Be with You", *Sermon Seeds*, United Church of Christ, found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-peace-be-with-you-2/>, accessed April 16, 2023.

by seeing *other* evidences and proofs of the transcendence and allow their lives to be transformed'.

It cannot be that the belief in the physical resurrection is the *sine qua non* for following Jesus and thus *the* defining arbiter of being a faithful Christian. Witnessing the physical resurrection is only one of many possible evidences of the transcendent and it need not be mine and yours – for it is not as we have not seen nor touched Jesus. It is in the transcendent that is to be believed, not necessarily nor exclusively belief in a bodily resurrection.

The gospel narratives give as much evidence for as against the physical resurrection of Jesus. At the tomb, Mary did not recognize Jesus. How can this be if it was purely a physical resurrection? Jesus, specifically told Mary not to touch him. Why? I infer from this prohibition that Jesus was not actually physical. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus did not recognize Jesus, for hours! It was not until Jesus broke bread and prayed that they recognized him. When Jesus appeared to the disciples, they did not recognize him. How is that? They just spent three years with him! According to the gospels, Jesus magically appeared in and out of rooms with shut and locked doors. It that not 'evidence' that something other than physical happened? Even before his resurrection, during the Transfiguration, Jesus' appearance was clearly something more than just physical.

John 9:29 states “As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.” Another example: Saul’s encounter with Jesus after Jesus’ ascension is quite clearly a non-physical, yet nonetheless audible, manifestation of Jesus (Acts 9:4). So, before and after Jesus’ death, we have some kind of metaphysical appearances, manifestations, and visions that are not, strictly speaking, physical.

It makes perfect sense that the gospels offer contrasting perspectives about whether the resurrection was physical because during Jesus’ time the meaning of ‘resurrection’ was a topic of debate. The ancient Hebrews did not believe in the resurrection. It was understood that after a person died they lived in Shoal which is a place of eternal sleep. It was not until the second century BCE that the resurrection as a concept emerges in the book of Daniel.³ But in Daniel, the resurrection was of the soul only, whereby ‘angelic’ beings emerge. Then during Jesus’ time, the Essenes, the Sadducees, and Pharisees debated about the resurrection. The Sadducees understood the resurrection was spiritual. The

³ “...when the 2nd century BC author of the Book of Daniel wrote that “many of those sleeping in the dust shall awaken”, religion scholar Dag Øistein Endsjø believes he probably had in mind a rebirth as angelic beings (metaphorically described as stars in God’s Heaven, stars having been identified with angels from early times); such a rebirth would rule out a bodily resurrection, as angels were believed to be fleshless.” “Resurrection of Jesus”, *Wikipedia*, found at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resurrection_of_Jesus#:~:text=In%20Judaism%2C%20the%20idea%20of,completely%20alien%20to%20the%20Greeks., accessed April 16, 2023.

Pharisees understood the resurrection was physical.⁴ Yet, the apostle Paul, a former Pharisee understood that the physical resurrection would raise a body that is 'imperishable' (I Corinthians 15:35).⁵ Yet, that is not really a physical body then since physical bodies are perishable. So, clearly there is something in the gospels and the from the Apostle Paul that understands the physical resurrection as not something that is exactly physical.

Jesus physical resurrection did not make sense to the disciples nor to Thomas – hence there was so much initial doubt. Nonetheless, the resurrection was a manifestation of the transcendent, evidence and proof that something beyond themselves gave their lives meaning.

What 'does not make sense' to me? What does not make sense to me is how Bonnie, who is not an orthodox Christian, is so faithfully devoted to our church. That doesn't make sense to me. Why did Isaac Evans-Frantz run for Senate

⁴" Josephus tells of the three main Jewish sects of the 1st century AD, that the Sadducees held that both soul and body perished at death; the Essenes that the soul was immortal but the flesh was not; and the Pharisees that the soul was immortal and that the body would be resurrected to house it. Of these three positions, Jesus and the early Christians appear to have been closest to that of the Pharisees."

"Resurrection of Jesus", *Wikipedia*, found at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resurrection_of_Jesus#:~:text=In%20Judaism%2C%20the%20idea%20of,completely%20alien%20to%20the%20Greeks., accessed April 16, 2023.

⁵ "...the new body is a special, holy body..."

"Resurrection of Jesus", *Wikipedia*, found at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resurrection_of_Jesus#:~:text=In%20Judaism%2C%20the%20idea%20of,completely%20alien%20to%20the%20Greeks., accessed April 16, 2023.

despite the massive odds against him? That doesn't make sense to me. Why did Daniel Sicken bang a hammer on a missile silo knowing he will spend years in federal prison – which he did? It doesn't make sense to me. Why does April Harkness devote herself to the Sacred Places initiative when she does not even live close to Brattleboro? That doesn't make sense to me. Why did so many in our church give so much time and energy to the Masoudi family when they were already overcommitted and overscheduled? [In fact, Lynn Herzog is with the family in Washington, D.C. this week visiting.] That so many donated over a year of their time to people they did not even know doesn't make sense to me. Our community experienced the brutal murder of a wonderful young social worker. Yet our community still graciously volunteers to take care of those most vulnerable in our community. That doesn't make sense to me. Nonetheless, we gather together as a community at The Common to express our hope and trust in that which is transcendent (and thus beyond ourselves). All of these examples taken from our church point me to the transcendent because something above and beyond the members and friends of our congregation fosters in them faith and a dedication that does not on the surface of things make any sense. And so, I hear Jesus say to us all, "Peace be with you".

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".