**Experiencing Resurrection**

**Psalm 150
John 20:19-31**

No one would accuse my siblings or me of being great dancers. Put us out on the dance floor and we tend to have the appearance of someone with serious constipation problems, urgently in need of some ex-lax. People tend to avert their eyes, so as not to be embarrassed. We do come by our dancing deficit honestly.

 We grew up in a church that saw dancing as sinful. Our mom would send me off to school with a note that said, “Please excuse Timmy from dance lessons.” We would be down stairs participating in the physical education class. The volleyball game has ended and now it is time to learn some dance moves. Those of us who belonged to either the Braham Evangelical Covenant Church or Stanchfield Baptist Church would pool together in our own little group and with heads lowered in embarrassment, head back to the class room, while the dance music played in the background.

 I never understood exactly what was wrong with dancing. When I arrived at the age of confirmation and asked why dancing was an issue, the pastor basically said, because it is sinful, end of story no more questions. Most of the pastor’s responses left little or no room for further questions. He would have been among those who saw Thomas in our Gospel less today as a perfectly good, bad example.

Thomas is out running a few errands. Unfortunately while Thomas is out the disciples have this amazing experience of the Risen Christ. When Thomas left the other disciples were huddled together in fear. The door was securely locked, with a dead bolt for extra measure. Jesus has been executed and the disciples have good reason to think they will be next. You can cut the tension in the room with a knife. That’s how it is when Thomas leaves. When Thomas returns they are all singing, “*Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,…”*  At first Thomas thinks he must be at the wrong place, but when he enters, there are the disciples, all peaceful and calm, the fear all but gone.

 **Excitedly they tell Thomas, “we have seen the Lord”. That is when Thomas forever gets himself on my home town pastor’s bad example list. Granted this is a rather loose translation, but Thomas response to the other disciples pretty much goes like this, “yeaaaaah riiight….unless I experience Christ myself, count me a skeptic. I won’t believe any of it.” To my pastor, Thomas fully deserves the label he has been given, “Doubting Thomas”. But, for me Thomas was the closest thing to a saint. If you can raise questions about the Risen Christ than certainly there are other things you can raise questions about as well, including dancing. I found my way into the United Church of Christ in no small measure because from all that I could tell there were a good number of people in the UCC who also considered Thomas a bit of a saint.**

 **This past week William Irwin, professor of Philosophy at King’s College, had a column in the New York Times which is entitled, “God is a Question, Not an Answer”. Irwin is making an argument for both believers and non-believers to remain open on any final answers about God. Williams states, “People who claim certainty about God worry me, both those who believe and those who don’t believe. They do not really listen to the other side of conversations, and they are too ready to impose their views on others.” Williams notes the famous philosopher and avowed atheist Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say to God if it turned out there was one and he met him at judgment. Russell replied, “You gave us insufficient evidence.” To which Williams adds, “even believers can appreciate Russell’s response. God does not make it easy. God, if he (she) exists is…the hidden God.”**

**Williams concludes the article by saying “As non-believers should have a doubt of desire, so, too believers should have a faith infected by doubt.” It is, of course, one thing to have question and doubts, it is another thing when those doubts or questions never make room for insight, awareness, growth or experience. One simply continues to question and doubt with no effort to address the questions that are being raised. As much as I value the UCC this is the flip side of the affirmation of doubts and questions we embrace. Sometimes, it is easy for us doubters to treat doubts as a value in and of themselves rather than as a potential path to something richer and deeper.**

**In all likelihood the disciples felt more than a little frustrated, perhaps angry with Thomas for his doubts and unwillingness to accept what they have experienced. The disciples would have understood the anger and frustration expressed this past week by those protesting the ruling of Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman when he decided to not prosecute the two officers responsible for the death of Jamar Clark. The main stream media and most folks want to make this incident solely about whether the officers were justified in shooting Clark. But, regardless of what one believes about what happened that night, the NACCP, Black Lives Matter and many others are saying we are tired of having our experiences doubted. We are tired of questions that never lead anywhere. We are tired of people doubting the things we say about our own lived experience and using those doubts as a basis for doing nothing. The experience is one of being mistreated by police, stopped for no reason, treated differently and unfairly by the judicial system, provided fewer educational opportunities, fewer job opportunities, the list goes on and on and all we get is doubts and questions, nothing more. You can no more blame people for being angry about the Jamar Clark verdict than you can blame the disciple in feeling anger at Thomas for doubting their experience of the Risen Christ.**

**Experience matters. In his book The Cross and the Lynching Tree, the preeminent African American theologian and author, James Cone critiques the famous ethicist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr for Niebuhr’s lack of attention to the experience of and threat of lynching that was occurring in the U.S. during the time when Niebuhr was writing and teaching. Cone argues that lynchings were the U.S. equivalent of the cross on which Jesus was executed. Niebuhr’s failure to make this connection was a denial of the lived experience of African Americans in this country.**

**Experience matters. It was a concern for experience that led the 19th Century, Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard to develop the philosophy known as existentialism. For Kierkegaard existentialism is a corrective to the tendency of minimizing or even ignoring the importance of human experience.**

**John’s Gospel is written to Christians who are vitally concerned about the issue of experience. They live some 50 – 60 years after Jesus has been executed. Those who had a firsthand experience of Jesus have all died. John is writing to people for whom the question of experience is central. Jesus is no longer present. Those early disciples who were present to experience the Risen Christ are no longer around. The people to whom John’s Gospel is written wonder, they worry is it still possible to experience the Risen Christ?**

**In his book the Heart of Christianity, author and theologian Marcus Borg refers to the experience of faith as centered in the heart. As Borg notes, “heart appears more than a thousand times in the Bible. Most often, it is a comprehensive metaphor for the self.” In other words, human experience. Borg argues, “the heart, this deeper level of the self, is the place of transformation.”**

**In his book “Healing the Heart of Democracy” author Parker Palmer gets to the central dilemma faced by Thomas with his doubts, the same dilemma identified by Black Lives Matter and the NAACP in the shooting of Jamar Clark. Palmer states, “If you hold your knowledge of self and world wholeheartedly, your heart will at times get broken by loss, failure, defeat, betrayal or death. What happens next in you and the world around you depends on how your heart breaks. If it breaks apart into a thousand pieces, the result may be anger, depression and disengagement. If it breaks open into greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the result may be new life.” This is the issue Thomas now faces and we often face, not only with Jamar Clark, but anytime we encounter questions and doubts that trouble us. Will our hearts be broken apart –leading to anger and disengagement or will our hearts be broken open, leading to the possibility of new life? Palmer states, “In Christian tradition, the broken-open heart is virtually indistinguishable from the image of the cross. It was on the cross that God’s heart was broken for the sake of humankind, broken open into a love that Christ’s followers are called to emulate.”**

**Thomas has doubts about the risen Christ. St. Thomas has doubts about the experience of the disciples. As William Irwin reminds us we need to honor these doubts and we have reason to be concerned about people who have no room for doubts and questions. Yet, doubting and raising questions is never enough. They can be a starting point for growth, for insight, for awareness, for learning, for experience, but doubts and questions are never the end point.**

 **A week after Thomas came back to find the disciples joyfully singing “All Are Welcome” the disciples and Thomas are together, doors shut, but no longer locked, when Jesus appears with the same blessing he earlier offered to the disciples, “Peace be with you.”**

 **Then Jesus does what Kierkegaard, Borg, Palmer and many others have said is so essential, Jesus says, come and experience for yourself, “**Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

 **This invitation of the Risen Christ is an invitation for the church to whom John writes, but also an invitation for people of every age. Come experience with hearts broken open the wounds of Christ. Come experience with hearts broken open the wounds of North Minneapolis, and everyone who feels the brutality of discrimination, the pain of loss, the struggle of depression, the uncertainty of illness. Doubts and questions that are devoid of Christ’s compassion, Christ’s healing, Christ’s suffering for justice, Christ’s love, only lead to cynicism, despair or disengagement. Come experience the love that leads to new life.**

 **It is our calling as a community of faith to be a place where Christ is known, where the invitation is given and the experience of love, forgiveness, justice and compassion are made real for all who enter these doors at Cherokee Park United. Come experience. Let your hearts be broken open. Do not doubt, but believe that you too are loved by God.**

 **I have one more week to go at Cherokee Park United Church. Who knows what I will do after that. Maybe I will take dance lessons. I do know that as long as I live, I will have my doubts and my questions. But, I also believe that a heart broken open is what the experience of resurrection is all about.**

**Psalm 150**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist reminds us that when we are in relationship with God and one another we need to bring our whole selves, body, mind and spirit in offering God our praise.*

Praise be to God! Praise God in God's own sanctuary; praise God in the mighty firmament!
Praise God for God's mighty deeds; praise God according to God's surpassing greatness!
Praise God with trumpet sound; praise God with lute and harp! Praise God with tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe! Praise God with clanging cymbals; praise God with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise God! Praise be to God!

**John 20:19-31**

***Our Gospel lesson is among the resurrection experiences of the disciples recorded by John. John’s purpose for including this story featuring the doubts and questions of Thomas is to address the very real concerns and worries of those who never met Jesus and wonder if it is possible they too can experience the Risen Christ.***

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."  A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.