

## What If We Rarely Say Never?

Friends, long-time and new, let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. Holy, Loving Spirit of God, we find ourselves on this second Sunday in Easter. Be with us as our minds and our hearts open further to your grace – to you invitation to rarely say never. Amen.

Beloved people, what if we rarely say never? It was the summer of 2004. I would graduate from college several months later, try out full-time in outdoor ministry for several years, do the same with elementary school teaching, and eventually head to seminary and toward pastoral ministry. That summer, I worked as a program assistant at Shoshone Mountain Retreat, located along the Coeur d'Alene River in northern Idaho.

*“An active faith involves a balance between conviction and doubt.”* Pastor Amy shared this maxim with me as we sat together at a picnic table on camp's grounds. We had worked together that week in community outreach ministry, I as a member of the summer camp staff and she as a leader who had brought a youth group from Pepin, Wisconsin.

An active faith involves a balance between conviction and doubt. Serenity filled her smile as she uttered the words. Over the course of that week, I had discovered in Pastor Amy an excellent conversation partner. And, in that picnic table moment, her words opened a window to grace that helped me understand my relationship with God in a new way.

God is with each of us as we experience our deepest convictions, as we experience our deepest doubts, and in all of the spiritual space between deep conviction and deep doubt. God permeates all parts of our faith journey. God is love.

That picnic table moment of opening into deeper faith was as breathtaking for me as were the Bitterroot Mountains that surrounded us.

According to the gospel of John, on two separate post-resurrection occasions, Jesus appeared to his disciples in the house where they were hiding. On both occasions Jesus came, stood among them, and greeted them with the words, *“Peace be with you.”* During each visit, Jesus seemed to have anticipated how his friends would receive his presence.

The first visit took place on the evening of that first Easter day on which Mary of Magdala had discovered Jesus’ empty tomb and encountered Jesus’s living presence outside the tomb. She as well as Peter and John had shared their incredible experiences with Jesus’ other close disciples, who were likely confused by the stories they were hearing.

Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey retired in recent years from her ministry as Dean of the Amistad Chapel at our national UCC offices in Cleveland. She reflects on how those first disciples may have felt. She writes:

*“**Overwhelmed**’ might describe the disciples after Jesus died, huddled together in their fear and confusion, not knowing where to turn or what to do next. Their leader and teacher who had held them together all those months was dead, executed like a common criminal, and lying in a tomb (or so they thought). With Jesus into that tomb went their hope and their sense of purpose. They were left only with an overwhelming sense of failure, loss, and shame, because they had deserted Jesus in his hour of need.”* Words from Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey.

They needed to see Jesus in order to be reassured of his continued presence among them. So Jesus appeared to them.

He showed them his wounds – the physical markings from his execution. He anticipated that this viewing would strengthen their faith. And it did.

Seeing Jesus made it possible for them to receive his peace with joy and to feel new hope. This renewed experience of God's peace likely contributed to their eventual readiness to open the doors and step back out into the world beyond the confines of that house.

Thomas was not present during Jesus' first post-resurrection visit to his disciples. I wonder what had caused Thomas to venture out from that locked room. Perhaps he went out to get food for the group or to visit a sick friend or family member. Whatever the reason, it must have taken a lot of courage.

When Thomas returned, the disciples told him that they had seen and interacted with the risen Jesus. Second-hand reports were not sufficient to renew Thomas's faith. Well, he needed to directly experience the living presence of his teacher and friend in order to be reassured of their continued relationship. *"I'll never believe it without putting my finger in the nail marks and my hand into the spear wound."* Thomas did not argue with or dismiss his friends' convictions, but he did claim a need to have his own experiences of doubt and conviction – his own experiences of faith.

I have long appreciated the honesty and candor that Thomas demonstrates in this story. Those traits make him a sympathetic character. **I wonder for us today: when has each of us last use the word 'never' or 'always' to articulate a firm stance? What do you claim you will never do? What do you claim you will you always do?**

Sometimes, in some cases, decisive use of never and always is protective of self or other – particularly when behaviors need to change in situations we experience of abuse, injustice, journeys from addiction toward recovery.

But never and always can also limit possibilities – limit the space within which God’s Love can move as forgiveness and grace in our lives. Never and always about our own decisions and behaviors can often lead to unhealthy attachment to what we’ve claimed. Do you remember a time when you’ve found yourself in that sort of stubborn pride that is scared, ashamed and with a façade of self-assuredness? And you’ve just saying that you’ve just decided never or always! It can be so hard to take a turn in a new direction.

When Jesus appeared the second time to his disciples, he invited Thomas to touch his wounds, saying: “***Don’t persist*** in your unbelief, but believe!” Jesus did not really scold Thomas for his doubt; he simply asked Thomas to take a step toward belief. Jesus’ anticipation of Thomas’s needs and his simple call to believe were enough for Thomas to explode in words of relief. “*My Savior and my God!*”

Jesus invited Thomas into that gracious spiritual space that expands us beyond the either/or of never and always. In the end, Thomas did not need to touch Jesus’ wounds as he had thought he needed to. Jesus’ acknowledgement of Thomas’s need to experience Jesus’ presence on his own individual terms was enough to renew Thomas’s faith in Jesus’ continued companionship. **I wonder: how does Jesus come and stand with you today? And how does Jesus come and stand among us as St. Croix United Church today? Through whom or through what do you hear Jesus saying “Peace be with you?”**

Jesus stands with me when my questions and doubts lead me to yearn for deeper understanding and trust. His peace envelops me when conviction and belief infuse me with the joy and hope I need for moving forward.

**How does Jesus come and stand with you, with us today?**

We heard this in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles: *“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”*

Biblical scholar Gail R. O’Day has written this: *“For fifty days,”* [we know that is until Pentecost in our liturgical calendar] *“the church lives into the reality of the resurrection, of what it means to be a community shaped by the dying and rising of Christ.”* And Jesus offers his presence over and over again to partner with us in this reality. God calls us out from behind closed and locked doors, individually and collectively.

So how are we as St. Croix United Church pursuing the path O’Day describes – *“living into the reality of the resurrection, of what it means to be a community shaped by the dying and rising of Christ?”*

C.S. Lewis, 20th century theologian, teacher and author, once wrote this about our Christian faith: *“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”* **I wonder: do you and do we see everything through the lens of resurrection love**

And Pastor Amy invited me in 2004 and all of us today to trust that *“an active faith involves a balance between conviction and doubt.”*

May Jesus stand with each one of us as he stood with Thomas in his fear and courage.

May Jesus stand among this congregation in our convictions, doubts, fear and courage just as he stood among his disciples on that first Easter.

May we recognize and rejoice in God's powerfully peaceful presence in our lives.

May we open ourselves to each opportunity to carefully consider our tendencies toward staking a claim of never or always for our own actions.

May we embody an active faith – a living balance between conviction and doubt. Resurrection Love is counting on us. Amen.

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John 20:19-31, Acts 4:32-35