

[PRAYER] [BLANK] What a beautiful Easter week we had, worship-wise, and weather-wise, Amen? I slowed down a little bit on Thursday, and just rejoiced in everything that is coming to life around us. Even outside, by our sign, daffodils are popping up that haven't put out flowers in a long time. God's gift of life is persistent, insistent, and consistently calling us to trust and praise the God of our Creation. God's story is not done with us yet!

Life is a gift. And, on this first Sunday after Easter, we can continue to praise God for the gift of new life in Jesus. Jesus showed us how, on that first Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene, a disciple of Jesus, was the first to recognize the risen Jesus. Her life was never the same. The world's life was never the same. Our lives can never be the same, once the risen Jesus is a living truth in our hearts.

[NEW LIFE] In the weeks ahead, my sermons will explore what it's like to have the story of the risen Jesus really affect how we live our lives. God promises us new life through the gift of faith in the risen Jesus. What is that kind of life like? What does it mean for us, and God's world? The Bible tells us how the first Christians explored the answers to these questions. And we can see in the Bible that the disciples of the risen Jesus also had a hard time accepting and understanding what a new life in Jesus was like, just as we do. We're not alone. [BLANK]

We can see this in today's gospel reading from John. The risen Jesus walked right into the room where the disciples were hiding, but Thomas wasn't there when it happened. Thomas wouldn't believe that Jesus was risen, in spite of what other disciples had seen and heard, unless he could see and touch the wounds of Jesus. Jesus came later to Thomas and the others, and invited Thomas to touch the wounds of Jesus. Thomas then accepted Jesus was his risen Lord, not because he touched Jesus - the story doesn't say that Thomas touched Jesus! - but because Thomas knew that Jesus knew he wanted to touch Jesus!

For those of us looking for proof of the risen Jesus that we can touch with our hands, that's not what we really need for a new life in Jesus. Like Thomas, what we need is the risen Jesus touching our hearts with the truth of who Jesus is, knowing that Jesus knows everything about us, just as we are. God touching us in our hearts with the truth of the risen Jesus is proof that God's promise of new life, through faith in Jesus, is real. The risen Jesus who lives in us is just as real, and just as transformed by what Jesus offers us. New life in the risen Jesus is something that takes us away from our fears, and allows us to proclaim the good news of the love of God in Jesus that death itself cannot conquer. The new life that Jesus plants in our hearts changes us. No longer fearing the worst thing to fear in this world - death itself - can liberate us to have joy, right now.

We know this, because this is how Christianity has always spread, and continues to spread today. This is what we see today in today's reading from the Acts of the apostles. Peter, the disciple of Jesus who denied knowing Jesus on the night that Jesus was arrested for execution, was the first to preach the good news of Jesus in the streets of Jerusalem. The forgiveness and love of the risen Jesus freed Peter from the shame of his

denial, and freed him to show the world that the power of Jesus was still alive.

And for this, Peter was arrested, and brought before the same religious leaders who plotted to have Jesus killed on the cross, just a few weeks before. The religious leaders had given Peter strict orders not to preach about Jesus. They were afraid that they would be blamed by people for the death of Jesus. They wanted everyone to forget Jesus! But Peter would have none of this. Right in front of his accusers, he proclaimed that Jesus, who the religious leaders had helped to kill, was alive, and was giving everyone who believed in him new life, in God’s Holy Spirit. God waits for us all to admit and let go of our sins, Peter said, to have a new life from God, in Jesus.

The religious leaders let Peter go, thinking that it would all die down, that what Peter was claiming couldn’t possibly be true. They expected the good news of Jesus to die, as certainly as they thought Jesus was dead and gone. They were wrong, of course. And they are wrong, today. Nothing stops the good news of Jesus from reaching God’s world, even against orders in the most challenging places.

[STEPHEN] You may recall me talking about a new friend of mine in Uganda, Stephen, who has powerful ministries among God’s people there. But Stephen is not alone. There are young people across God’s world who are finding and offering new life in Jesus to people who have never been touched by the good news of Jesus. [JAMI] Another young Christian leader who I have met is named Jami. He lives in Faisalabad, a city in northern Pakistan. He is one of about one million Protestant Christians in his nation, less than one percent of his nation’s population.

Being a Christian is a challenge in many parts of God’s world. In Pakistan, it can mean confronting laws that can bring Christians to court on charges of blasphemy. Some escape with their lives, like Peter did in the religious court. Others are not so lucky. When we say that a life in Jesus can go against the orders of the world, in many places today, that challenge is still the same as Peter’s.

[PREACHING] And yet, in the middle of these challenges, the Christians of Pakistan are doing just what Peter did. They go against orders that would stop their proclamation of the gospel. They literally take it to the streets of their city, to preach the new life in Jesus. And they proclaim Jesus loudly, as they gather to worship, and when they worship. Here are just a few moments of their joy for a new life in Jesus that I’d like to share. [VIDEO]

You see, the good news of Jesus is real. The stories that we read in the Bible about how Christianity started show us what Christians do today, and need to do today. Our clothes may be different, our cultures may be different, but we are still human beings, all from one Creator, and all offered the challenge of living a new life in Jesus by proclaiming it. Like Jami, like Stephen, like Peter, like Thomas, in order to claim our new life in Jesus, we have to proclaim it, even when proclaiming Jesus goes against the orders of those who fear the truth of God’s love in Jesus coming into God’s world. We cannot separate the two. To claim new life in Jesus, we must proclaim Jesus as our Lord and the source of our salvation.

And as we proclaim Jesus, we need to bring good things into God’s world, and we need to be sharing our absolute love for God by honoring and respecting and cooperating with all people of all faiths, or of no faith, and not condemning them. Yet, if we do not do these things in the name of Jesus, then we cannot really expect a new life in Jesus. We cannot expect the promises of God’s love in Jesus to grow in us, or in God’s world, until we proclaim them, first in our own hearts, and then, in God’s world, even when it seems to be against the orders of the world.

The question that we must explore together in this sermon series, though, is: how do we do this? How do we find new life in Jesus that honors and respects a world that is often so different from us? How do we find new life in Jesus that does not exclude others because of who they are, and how they are, no matter what? How can we learn to proclaim our new life in Jesus in our hearts, and in God’s world, as a way to bring people together in God’s love, and not to divide them, based on hate and condemnation? How can we help God to purify our hearts, and the hearts of others, in God’s love, and still be humble enough to know that God’s purity doesn’t make us less human than others?

As Stephen, Jami, Peter, and Thomas show us, there are no easy answers to these questions. We need to be honest about our own challenges and limitations. We need to seek out one another for honest discussions, and prayer. And we need to think about how we practice going against the orders of a world that doesn’t want people to know Jesus. But this is the promise of an empty tomb, and the risen Jesus who escaped it, the promise that Christians around the world today proclaim, against orders. Let us begin this journey into new life in Jesus, with love, peace, and hope for all. Amen.