

2nd Sunday of Easter, Year B
April 7, 2024
St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church
John 19:19-31

“Inconceivable”

Everyone has their own list of their top 5 favorite movies, those classics that you can quote line by line, and you can still watch over and over again if you were trapped on a deserted island or just bored on a rainy day. At the top of my list is *The Princess Bride*. I watched it for the first time at a slumber party when I was young and I've been in love with it ever since. Hopefully, you've seen this venerable piece of cinema and know exactly what scene I'm talking about, but for those who haven't, let me set the stage. Towards the beginning of the film, the classic damsel in distress, Princess Buttercup, is kidnapped by con man and self-proclaimed genius, Vizzini, and his hired henchmen, Fezzik and Inigo Montoya. After the three capture the princess, for their purposes of starting a war between the neighboring kingdoms, they make their escape and as they do so they notice that they are not alone on their journey. They are being followed by the mysterious “man in black”, who incidentally is our story's hero, Westley, the long-lost-thought-dead true love of Buttercup. At each stage of their travels, Vizzini is sure that they've managed to outmaneuver the “man-in-black” only to realize that he is not only still following them but he has managed to gain ground! And at each moment that this occurs Vizzini looks back, and shouts in his nasally-slightly-lispy voice, “Inconceivable!” He is so confident in his genius master plan that he arrogantly assumes it would be impossible, inconceivable even, that anyone would be able to keep up with them and foil his plan. He does this so many times that one of his hired hands, Inigo Montoya, the Spanish swordsman, remarks, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it does.”

In this season of Easter, we talk of things like resurrection, new life, salvation, reconciliation, and the redemption of all creation. We talk of Jesus victorious, conquering sin and death, but sometimes I do not think these things mean what we think they do. How can we

know what these things truly mean when we don't live, with our whole lives, the Easter proclamations we have been shouting from the rooftops for the past week - that Christ is Alive! Alleluia!... Now what?

This morning we have read one of the most familiar post-resurrection stories, the story of Thomas, yes that Thomas - "doubting Thomas." Poor Thomas gets a pretty bad rap, forever labeled by this one story. I mean how unfair is it that he just happened to be out getting the take out order or running some other errand, when Jesus showed up for the first time to the assembled disciples that first Easter evening. We don't call Peter, denying Peter, do we? And it's not like the rest of the disciples believed right away the women who first saw the empty tomb, or Mary Magdalene who was the very first to encounter the risen Christ and thus be the first ones to literally preach the gospel!. Thomas' reaction is honestly I think pretty reasonable. His request to see Jesus, to see and feel the marks of the nails in his hands and his feet and to feel his side where he was pierced, was no more "proof" than what the other disciples had already received. And if we're honest with ourselves wouldn't we react the same? If someone we loved had died, if we had experienced such a loss – and indeed many of us have – wouldn't we require such proof, such strong evidence before we started to believe the impossible? Before we let ourselves hope for the one thing we so desperately want, but won't - can't - let ourselves believe is true?

Back to the story of the Princess Bride, following the classic fairy tale troupe, our hero Westley after enduring a series of trials, finally reaches his beloved Buttercup, defeats the evil Vizzini in a battle of wits, and is reunited with his long-lost love. Buttercup is understandably astonished to find out that that man that she had loved and mourned and grieved over for years was indeed not dead, but alive! She tells Westley, "But I thought you were dead?" to which he answers "Death cannot stop true love, what it can do is delay it awhile."

For Thomas, and the disciples, and us, the resurrection is about more than just the

sign of Jesus alive again, wounds and all, to hang out with his friends and impart a few more words of wisdom to them, it's about the truth that the sign represents. God, revealed and incarnate in Jesus Christ showed us once and for all how far God was willing to go to demonstrate just how much God loves us. This kind of love God demonstrates on the cross, dying, going to hell and back, is true love - a love far bigger than the stuff of fairy tales. Christ alive means that death cannot stop true love, the cross cannot stop true love, sin cannot stop true love!

Now despite our witness to this sign of resurrection, there are some of the truths about God and God's care for us that we have a difficult time accepting and living out in our lives.

Truths like...

- "Jesus Christ has conquered sin and death, so that we may no longer live in fear, but in love and gratitude." - Inconceivable!
- "Your sins are forgiven" - Inconceivable!
- "There is nothing we can do to make God stop loving us, nothing we can do that will cause God to turn his back on us, nothing we can do that will make us irredeemable to God." - Inconceivable!
- "Just as you are, you are a worthy Child of God!" - Inconceivable!
- "You are called and claimed to be Christ in the world. And what you do, what we do, makes a difference!" - Inconceivable!

How can we sing our Alleluias and proclaim "He is Risen!" and yet still have that chatter in the backs of our minds that says, "this is all too good to be true," "this kind of love is inconceivable"?

What keeps us from living Easter lives and believing these truths with our whole beings and living into our identity as saved people?

In today's lesson we read that the disciples were locked in a house for fear "of the Jews." And just so we're clear, "the Jews" here doesn't mean our friends up and down the avenue at Temple Sinai and Touro Synagogue. The Gospel of John was written by Jews, for Jews, and so

when he mentions “the Jews,” these were the religious leaders, those in authority who misused and abused their power to have their friend and teacher killed. And the disciples were afraid that those same authority figures would be coming after them. They were so afraid that after witnessing the Risen Christ, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, they were still locked up in that house a week later. So perhaps, it’s not so surprising that Thomas had difficulty believing their story because the disciples were exactly where and how he left them, locked away from the outside world and afraid and unchanged by their encounter with their Resurrected Lord. And so Jesus shows up again and he gives Thomas what he needs to believe. In the next chapter Jesus shows a few more times and again gives the disciples what they need in those encounters to believe, to have courage, and to be transformed by the truth of his resurrection, and in turn go out and share this Good News with the world! Indeed, church history records that Thomas himself will travel all the way to parts of southern Asia where there are churches that link their apostolic heritage back to Thomas’ missionary journeys.

We, like Thomas and the rest of the disciples, are given the chance to have what we need to believe. Christ shows up again and again to give us the faith needed to witness to the resurrection and the unfailing love of God. As John the gospel writer was relaying this story to his 1st century community, it was important that he let them, and now us, know that we don’t have to have actually seen the sign to know the truth of the resurrection. It is God who gives us faith, it’s not something that has to be forced. Faith also doesn’t have to look like everyone else’s in every time and place, **there is room for doubt, but there is also room for hope.** The Gospel truth of our faith transforms our lives and lives of those around us. And as we live out our faith, God guides and provides, giving us the strength and courage to live what we believe, so that we can believe in and do the impossible, even the inconceivable!