

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**  
**Second Sunday of Easter - Earth Day Sunday - April 18, 2004**  
**Anne G. Cohen**

**John 20:19-31**

**For Our Reflection:**

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature, and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be, and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.

- from the diary of Anne Frank, Dutch/Jewish teenager  
who died at Auschwitz Extermination Camp during WWII

**Shalom: Body and Soul**

As our story tells us, the Disciples were together in a locked room. They were afraid of the powerful people in their community - the ones who had felt threatened by the challenges Jesus and his followers had made.

The Disciples had been seen with Jesus, known as associates of his, dissidents, trouble-makers for the Romans who occupied their country, a problem for anyone who collaborated with the Romans. Jesus had been murdered along with two other participants in the insurrection. So the Disciples were afraid.

They were also ashamed. When the crucial time came to stand up for their beliefs - they had all run away, denied knowing Jesus, hidden themselves, saved themselves. They had ALL done it - so they understood one another - but they were ashamed nonetheless.

The Disciples were together in a locked room. They were together, but separated from God and one another - by shame and fear, locked into their isolation by grief and broken hearts and damaged souls. So you can imagine their mixed feelings, their joy AND discomfort - when Jesus appeared among them. It was miraculous, it was impossible, it was disconcerting. Shame can make for very uncomfortable reunion. Fear can cause a certain amount of agitation - people checking doors and locks - wondering how Jesus got in and if Roman Soldiers were to follow.

And Jesus said, "Shalom."  
Shalom. Peace be with you and within you.

Shalom. May your bodies and minds be quieted.  
Shalom. May your hearts be mended and your souls put at ease.  
Shalom. I do not bring judgment and punishment.  
I come with healing intentions - hoping to restore hope,  
to help you regain your sense of perspective.  
Shalom. I touch you and restore you to health.  
I speak reassuringly and weave you back together as a community.  
Shalom. I bring you peace, health, integrity, wholeness.  
Peace be with you - as I am with you - always.

This encounter was life changing for the Disciples in that locked room. But Thomas - much like the later Christian community, like John's audience, like most of us - Thomas wasn't there. He had a hard time believing what he was told. It is a pretty far fetched story - outside the realm of probability - certainly outside the realm of his previous experience.

Have you ever listened to someone else describe an experience that was very hard to believe? Outside the realm of your own experience?  
Have you ever doubted someone else's credibility?

Then again, have you ever had a unique experience - a life changing encounter - a surprising interaction with someone? Have you ever told others about it and not been believed? Have you ever been told that you must be nuts, you must be lying or telling a great story, you must be mistaken or exaggerating?

This story is meaningful because we've been in both positions. Most of us have doubted others - even those in authority - at times. And most of us have had our own credibility questioned - at some point or another.

The problem in this story isn't just Doubting Thomas. And it isn't just HIS lack of faith in the Risen Christ. The problem is that, when a community experiences a life changing event - good or bad - and some members are absent and miss out - the community itself can become fractured. If some are hurt and others are not - and those in pain are not believed - the injury cuts deeper, the chasm between people grows wider. If some experience healing and others do not - resentment and unexpressed shame, guilt and anger can intensify the schism in the community.

So Jesus comes again. The doors are no longer locked. More peace and wholeness have permeated the Disciples. But Thomas needs to be reunited with his community still. And so, although the doors are CLOSED, Jesus comes again and says, "Shalom."

Jesus touches Thomas and allows Thomas to touch him.  
Jesus gives him the benefit of EXPERIENCE over words -  
touch instead of a story.

Thomas is now INCLUDED in the new reality and is restored to community  
with his INTEGRITY intact - Shalom in his heart and mind and soul.

The story, as it is written, says,  
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... and that through believing  
you may have life in his name.

Knowing full well that stories do not have the same power as experiences  
- John, nevertheless, writes his Gospel - so that those of us who  
weren't there would know what THEIR experience was. And if we choose to  
believe - then we too can be made whole. We too can eat together and  
find healing and peace - Shalom - as a community in the name of Jesus -  
who EMBODIED Shalom.

What we have discovered - is that when a community embodies Shalom -  
healing, wholeness, integrity - and when that community offers these  
things to one another and to outsiders on a consistent basis - the  
community BECOMES the EXPERIENCE. The STORY becomes the PERSON  
- Christ is alive in the Body of the Church - and Shalom is the result.

The worst thing we can do - the most damaging thing that communities do  
to themselves - is to disbelieve one another's experience. To question  
another's credibility is to shame and injure that person, to shun and  
exclude them. To believe in someone's positive intent - even in the  
midst of our own doubts - to hear another person into speech - to  
believe that their story is at least true for them - if not true in many  
ways for self - is to feed the soul, heal the heart and repair community.

To believe in one another is Shalom. To embody Shalom is to believe in  
Christ - alive - among and in us.  
Shalom is Resurrection all over again - every day, every moment.

In a sense, Shalom is what the so-called DISSIDENTS Felujah, Iraq, are  
calling for. They are asking that those who occupy their country LISTEN  
to their side of the story, accept that- what they say - is true for  
them. FREEDOM to them is something completely different than what is  
being imposed upon them. Shutting down their newspaper is tantamount to  
calling them liars - while proving them right, I might add. The various  
people and cultural and religious perspectives in Iraq have enough to  
work out among themselves - without trying to communicate their struggle  
to a foreign power that doesn't get it.

And so the violence continues - a language that each side is hoping the other side DOES understand. And the schisms in Iraq continue to widen. Allowing another person or religion or country or culture their own point of view is an important element in diplomacy - and it is ESSENTIAL if one is liberating (not occupying/controlling) them. Peace depends on it. Only then will Shalom be possible.

Let me take one more step with this idea.

Community is not just groups of human beings, or even human beings as a species. Community happens because of and is dependent upon sustainable networks in Creation. Human life and human community are never separated from or independent from plants, animals and weather, continental drift or ocean tides, seasons and ozone layers.

When something is wrong in Nature - toxins, pollution, genocide, extinction, global warming, whatever - and we don't pay attention - don't believe the signs - then we will suffer the consequences along with the rest of the planet. Unless we offer the gift of belief in the credibility of Nature - and take seriously the warning stories that are being told all around us and within our own bodies - this community called Planet Earth WILL come apart. And no space pod or Mars rover can save us.

To embody the Spirit of Christ is to embody Shalom: Peace, health, Wholeness. It is to repair the brokenness of our community - in East Ventura County - and upon the Earth. It is to seek to mend the soul of humankind and to understand the soul of Creation. And the first step is to believe that the story the planet is telling us - is true for the planet.

Like any one of us, Nature yearns to be believed and is injured when her credibility is questioned. And we are injured with her.

On Earth Day 2004 - may we renew our commitment to believe in one another, to believe in our Mother Earth - and, piece by piece, member by member, repair the breach. Shalom, Peace Be With You.

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### **Bulletin**

### **WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION**

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

## Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

### + Call to Worship (Responsive) Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

One: For everything there is a season,  
and a time for every matter under heaven:  
Many: A time to be born, and a time to die;  
One: A time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
Many: A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
One: A time to break down, and a time to build up;  
Many: A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
One: A time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
Many: A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
One: A time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
Many: A time to seek, and a time to lose;  
One: A time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
Many: A time to tear, and a time to sew;  
One: A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
Many: A time to love, and a time to hate;  
One: A time for war, and a time for peace.  
Many: In this time, let us worship our Creator God.

### + Hymn of Eastertide The Day of Resurrection Hymnal # 245 vv.1&3

#### + Opening Prayer (unison)

Great Spirit, give us hearts to understand:

- never to take from creation's beauty more than we give;
- never to destroy wantonly for the furtherance of greed;
- never to deny to give our hands for the building of earth's beauty;
- never to take from her what we cannot use.

Give us hearts to understand:

- that to destroy earth's music is to create confusion;
- that to wreck her appearance is to blind us to beauty;
- that to callously pollute her fragrance is to make a house of stench;
- that as we care for her, she will care for us. Amen.

#### + Our Common Prayer (unison)

Creator God who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,  
on Earth as it is in Heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our debts  
As we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,

For Thine is the kingdom and the power  
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God is our comfort in every sorrow  
and our companion in all joy!

Sung Response "Hallelujah. God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

### **WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Just Peace Reflection

Conversation with Our Children Passing the Peace

Reading from the Christian Gospels John 20:19-31

Sermon Shalom: Body and Soul

### **WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Aztec Prayer of Dedication (unison)

God most giving and resourceful, I implore You: make it Your will  
that this people enjoy the goods and riches You naturally give,  
that naturally issue from You, that are pleasing and savory, that  
delight and comfort, though lasting but briefly, passing away as  
if in a dream. Amen.

+ Hymn of Shalom Peace I Leave With You, My Friends Hymnal # 249

+ Blessing (unison)

May the warm winds of heaven blow softly upon you  
and may the Great Spirit make  
Sunrise in your heart.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle)  
Hymnal # 236

Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja, Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja,  
Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja, Halleluja, halleluja.

+ Postlude

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**WORSHIP NOTES**

**Call to Worship** is from the Book of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NRSV)

**Opening Prayer** is a Native American prayer from the U.N. Environmental Sabbath Program

**Prayer of Dedication** is an Aztec prayer from Worship Resources published by the UCC Council for American Indian Ministry

**Blessing** is a Cherokee Blessing Ibid.