

Searching for Proof
The Second Sunday of Easter
April 23, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006
Gates Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

John 20:19-31
1 John 1:1-2:2

“Conspiracy Theories” abound!

- What did Franklin Delano Roosevelt and other in the U.S. Government know before Pearl Harbor?
- Who killed John Fitzgerald Kennedy?
- Who was behind the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr.?
- Who knew what before September 11, 2001?

Some of those questions are raised because of legitimate questions about facts, timing, what people knew and when they knew it. But questions cross the line when, with 20-20 hindsight, we start applying what we know now to what we assume everyone knew – or should have known - then. Then the issue becomes one of looking at the agenda of the person or persons who are trying to discover a "conspiracy." Bottom line: if you are determined, predetermined, to find a hidden agenda, a conspiracy, you will find one – perhaps to the point of delusion.

Ellen White's quote on the first page of our worship bulletin comes into play:

Talk unbelief, and you will have unbelief; but talk faith, and you will have faith. According to the seed sown will be the harvest.

Since World War II, "Holocaust Deniers" have spanned the spectrum of inconsequential to that of causing real harm. Certainly persons who want to justify their own racial hatred of another group have been more than happy to embrace the Holocaust as untrue or as a conspiracy because it plays to their agenda. To make matters worse, the Associated Press reported yesterday how “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” is still being read in Egypt and Syria. “The Protocols” were long ago proved to be a forged document. Compiled to show a Jewish conspiracy intent on ruling the world, they were written in Tsarist Russia to incite hatred of Jews and then utilized by the Nazis in the 1920s and 1930s to justify their ill treatment of the Jews. One of the most incredible and cruel ironies of history is that when Jews left Tsarist Russia, they went to the one country where they thought they would be most welcome and received best Germany.

The current President of Iran's contention that the Holocaust was a hoax - that the "Jews" have made that up to create sympathy from the West - is about as dangerous as it gets. With complete control of the media and other means of educating the people of that once grand land, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is making an already volatile part of the world all the more edgy and scary. He has sown the seeds of unbelief among his people, and the harvest will be that of fear, anger, resentment and all the more strife.

Now it is easy to point fingers - and we need to make sure that when we look in the mirror, we, and in particular those of the Christian faith, ... that we are in the business of planting seeds of faith instead of seeds of unbelief. How do, we, for example, respond to the atrocities committed on our soil on September 11, 2001? Those were real events that caused real harm and death. But, in the words of today's reading from 1 John that invite us to be a people of the light instead of a people of darkness, a people of faith in instead of doubt, should we not fight the temptation to succumb to the fruits of unbelief and the fruits of doubt - should we not fight the desire to only wreak revenge and retribution?

This isn't to suggest turning a blind eye to the dangers of the world - to not seek justice - but it is a reminder that there are two paths one can take - one that leads us towards the ways of God (who also calls for judgment albeit tempered by love) or the ways of - like a whirlpool eddy - the ways that take us downward in a spiral of hatred, mistrust, and anger - in an ever hastening spiral from which there is seemingly no return - or one that seeks, at some level, to understand the frustration of peoples that bring them to cause harm to others.

Seeds of doubt can be so subtle! People can take the smallest of inconsistencies and make mountains out of molehills, even when overwhelming facts stand in the way of the resulting conspiracy theories! The President of Iran is facing insurmountable odds. The agreement by the German government this last week to release all of the remaining millions of pages of documents and details of the death camps is going to make that stance of the Iranian government all the more difficult to defend.

Seeds of doubt profoundly impact where we place our hopes and put our energies. If we believe something can't be accomplished, we will never work for it. If we doubt the peoples of the world can live in peace, we will stop praying for it, much less working for it. If we think that all is lost in the battle against AIDS, then we will throw in the proverbial towel that indicates we have lost the battle. If we consider hunger a reality that can never be overcome, then we will stop finding ways to feed peoples stomachs - and probably stop trying to feed their souls.

For Tuesday's Funeral Mass for Robert Wegman, the family asked that the end of Matthew's 25th Chapter be one of the texts for the service. I "loved" [said facetiously] how the editors of the Democrat and Chronicle put it - "somewhere in Matthew it says that feeding the hungry is like feeding Jesus." Well, the words go like this - "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink - and those that did that for the least of my brothers and sisters did it to me!" Today's rejoinder to that is "I was in doubt and you fed me faith, I was hungry for good news and you gave me the Good News of Jesus Christ, I was thirsty and you filled me with overflowing joy and grace and hope and love"

Our yearning for the "truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" invites us to seek and search anywhere and everywhere for that which will assure us - and while pursuing assurance and asking questions is noble and of value, we need to make sure that the underlying principals - the reasons we are asking the questions are just as noble and just as faith-seeking - and not driven by preconceived conclusions.

When it comes to Jesus Christ, the crux of the story, the point on which all else, His teachings, miracles, parables, even His life, the issue around which all else revolves is the resurrection on Easter morning. From the first, there were conspiracy theories: He didn't really die. His near-

dead body was whisked away by sympathizers. He went into hiding. To take a step into the preposterous, He not only didn't die but He and Mary Magdalene were wed and had children whose offspring live in our midst today - if we could just take the DNA from everybody, we would know who they are!

In an attempt to prove the resurrection, there were – and still are - tales of people having pieces of the cross, attempts to find the cup from which Jesus drank on that Holy Thursday (the Holy Grail), dried drops of His blood, the stone on which He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. As seemingly above-boards and well-meaning as these attempts are to "prove" the resurrection, they fall short of what is expected of us as sisters and brothers of Christ.

Let us reflect on those days after the resurrection. Despite revisionist theories to the contrary, Jesus died on the cross. The Romans knew it. They poked Him just to make sure! His mother knew it when Jesus was brought down off the cross. Joseph of Arimathea knew it when he placed the body of Jesus in his own tomb. Even though Jesus told the disciples numerous times that He would rise from the dead, they knew he was dead and were in hiding lest the same fate befall them. Yes, there had been tales of Jesus being seen by Mary, other women, and other disciples - but surely that was fanciful, wishful thinking, the tricks of the mind's eye when one hopes against hope - and finds it wanting and in vain.

As we read in John's Gospel, the first time Jesus appeared to His disciples, Thomas was not present. Told that Jesus had appeared to the rest of them in a locked room, what was Thomas to think? His doubts - legitimate, grounded in the reality that "when one is dead one is dead" doubts - were put to rest by Jesus when the Christ appeared to them the second time. Much is made of Thomas' doubt - but all the more needs to be made of his corresponding belief - and Jesus' affirmation of all those who believe without seeing for themselves.

So - in our search for the truth if not proof, we have a choice. We can choose which path we will take: one of skepticism or one of faith; faith that allows for questions, even doubts, but one that leads ever upwards and into the light instead of the path of doubt that leads inexorably down - into the darkness of further doubt, insecurity and frustration. It matters not how many times we try to be assured or come to terms with the story. It matters not how many times the "History Channel" poses the questions or how many times people put the story on the big screen - be it Cecil de Mille or Mel Gibson. It matters not how many times people try to embrace the Shroud of Turin or other relics as proof of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. What matters is our approach, the direction and underlying motives of our pursuit of those eternal truths. What matters is that we are forever changed in our hearts and souls - and that in the end, not because we have the DNA but because we have the Word made Flesh in our inner beings - we are part of God's one family - the family of Christ, the family of the Risen One, the family that is enriched with grace and hope and love and all that is good and uplifting - the family that walks in the light and shuns the darkness.

Searching for truth? Make sure you are looking in the right place! Don't look in the tomb or tomb like places of your lives – *the* tomb is empty and the other tombs are empty as well! Look at the cross and see that it is empty, that it didn't win! Live in the light! Talk faith, practice faith, embrace faith - and you will know eternal truths like never before!

Amen.