

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
April 19, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Responses to the Resurrection,
Acts 4:32-35, I John 1: 1-2:2, John 20:19-31

You know how we get those pieces of mail that demand a response on our part? **“You must open this now!** they say in bold print. Such is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It calls for a response from those who hear of it and experience it. Unfortunately, the response of the modern church is to let down our excitement and energy after resurrection Sunday and go with business as usual. The truth of the matter is that the resurrection of Jesus was just the beginning point of the response of the early Christians not the end of the church’s story. The early church began to soar in spirit and numbers on the day of resurrection and thereafter. In fact, Easter morning was not the highlight of that day. For the first disciples it was that Sunday evening that really got them moving in their faith in Jesus Christ. Maybe we need to hold a second worship service on Easter evening to catch the Spirit given to the early church. Maybe then our response after Resurrection Sunday would be more of one with renewed energy for serving the Lord and growing the body of Christ.

Let’s look at the responses today’s scripture lessons offer us and see if any of them might inspire us beyond Resurrection Sunday morning. If you remember from last Sunday, it was Mary Magdalene, Peter and John who discovered the empty tomb. Mary is the one to whom the risen Jesus came and called by name. Mary, who had experienced the Risen Lord, became the first energized post resurrection follower of Jesus Christ. She went back to tell the others that she had met and talked to the Risen Lord. Peter and John probably told the others they had seen the empty tomb, but that was not nearly as exciting and assuring as Mary’s experience. I wonder how the disciples really responded to what Mary said. Did they believe her?

Have you ever seen something spectacular or been a part of an historic event and shared this experience with others who were not there. How have they responded? Did they believe you? This past Wednesday I experienced a spectacular event I want to share with you that has resurrection connections for me. I was having lunch with Laurie and Chuck Box at the Albany to talk about a reader’s copy of Chuck’s newest book. It has some very interesting twists on reconciliation and the Albany is mentioned in it. Anyway, while we were eating, and I was talking about the book, I tried to swallow a thick French fry and it became jammed in my throat. I could not move it down my throat nor could I breathe. Chuck immediately asked me if I needed help and I shook my head, “Yes! He jumped up and hit me in the back a couple of times. The potato loosened and the Heimlich maneuver he gave me as a follow up cleared my throat. It was a stunning moment to have your life saved by a church member. Yet, I had no doubt whatsoever that Chuck would get me breathing again. I will be forever grateful to Chuck and God for saving my life, resurrecting me so to speak. There is a refreshing feeling of grace to surviving it all. The fact I am here alive and in person, I

hope makes this story believable. I hope Chuck and Laurie have recovered from that wild lunch.

I think it was going to take Jesus appearing alive and in person to the disciples for Mary Magdalene's wild story of the resurrected Jesus to become believable. Remember these were fear-filled and grief stricken disciples who were hiding in a darkened room somewhere. That evening Jesus removed the problem of the believability of the resurrection for all the disciples, except for Thomas, who was not there. Jesus suddenly appeared in the room. That had to be terrifying. But he said, "Peace be with you." Then the disciples rejoiced because they too had seen and heard the Risen Lord. The disciples became so excited that Jesus had to calm them down again with "Peace be with you and the Father has sent me to you." Now they knew that Mary's story was true. Now they too could believe and be excited about life and the mission of God again. To keep this enthusiasm going, Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit upon them. What a turn around this was for these once very afraid and hiding out disciples of Jesus. What a vindication this was for Mary Magdalene.

A week after this, Jesus appeared to the one traditionally called "Doubting Thomas" who had said he would not believe anyone about Jesus' resurrection unless he saw him, talked to him and touched him. After Jesus did all this for Thomas, Thomas' response was the basic and classic statement of faith. "My Lord and my God!" This is the statement of faith Jesus wants to hear from all of us in response to his risen presence in our lives. Jesus then said, for the benefit of those of us who were not there nor have ever seen the Risen Lord quite like the disciples did, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." On the Sunday after resurrection Sunday, I may well be preaching to the choir in that all of you here "may not have seen and yet have come to believe." Blessed are you!! This is the best faith response to the resurrection, to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and God and to confess it aloud to the world. This means the Holy Spirit and God's refreshing grace has come upon you, too. It means, in contrast to Thomas, you have no doubt that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead and is your living Lord.

There are also additional responses to the resurrection as demonstrated by these disciples who experienced the Risen Lord. Because of what the first disciples and other 500 witnesses to the resurrection experienced in the Risen Jesus, they banded together as one community and shared everything in common as an internal witness. This was a remarkable response to the resurrection and what the Holy Spirit had given to them. What is even more responsive to the resurrection and remarkable is that they also went out into the community as an external witness to proclaim the gospel. Because of these responses to the resurrection a "great grace was upon them all." The experience of God's transforming grace—God's 'great grace' —enables believers to work in partnership with God through dispossession of their self-interest." They gave it all for Jesus. These were wise responses to the resurrection. Such responses caused the neighbors around them to hold the early Christians in high esteem. [TNIB Com. Vol. X, pg. 100](#)

We respond to the resurrection of Jesus in similar ways today at First Presbyterian Church. We pledge and gather our offerings of money to share them for the common good internally and externally to support our vision of bringing people together in Christ's love. If a special need arises, you generously give more. We share our time and talents to teach, to serve as church officers, to lead in worship, to reach out in mission work and visitations and to pray for one another. The faithfulness of the members of this church to the Risen Lord and to one another over the past 140 years has reflected that God's great grace has been upon us. Can we do more and do it better, sure we can. Our response to the resurrection internally and externally can always be improved. Yet, for what we do well, I wonder how our neighbors perceive our external witness as a church? I hope it is a good one.

As your pastor, I also have concerns about our internal perception of ourselves. We are going through a time of change somewhat like the early church did. Like them we are trying to figure out whom we are, and what God wants us to do in response to the resurrection as we experience it today. We keep praying for God's transforming grace to guide us. Our session is reading a book titled Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders by Gilbert Rendle, a United Methodist minister. He writes: "Leaders must look at, understand, and then appropriately respond to the needs of their congregation in a time of change. Leadership is not about knowing where the congregation is supposed to end up and controlling it to be sure it gets there. In fact, leaders often have to describe what their congregations are experiencing or feeling in order to understand what is going on. And then, with appropriate responses, leaders need to nurture the natural gifts of the congregation and help provide new learnings in order to help it manage a time of change." pg. 70. This is one of the reasons we are trying to visit as many members as possible. As leaders of the church, we need to know not only what you want, but how you feel so that we can help nurture this church. How we feel about ourselves can affect our response to the resurrection and God's transforming grace that come with it. In times of change or transitions, this is especially important.

As we work through this time of transition and respond to the resurrection by confessing our faith in Jesus Christ, taking Godly actions internally and externally, and becoming in touch with our feelings, there is another response to the resurrection today's scriptures highlight. It is one of the spirit, our inner connection to or fellowship with God in Jesus Christ. Our Epistle Lesson from I John speaks well to this. The writer of this passage obviously had experienced the resurrection of Jesus for he says: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life--this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us... We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ made this possible for us by shedding his blood as an expiation or a way of making amends to God for our sin when we could not do it for ourselves. I John tells us that

Christ's atoning blood cleanses us of our sins so that we can have the deepest and closest fellowship possible with the Lord. To be atoned by Christ's blood means we have atonement or "at one ment" with him. His spirit and our spirit become united. So, another wise response to the resurrection is to seek and find such a deep spiritual fellowship with God in Jesus Christ.

With such a deep spiritual fellowship with God in Jesus Christ, the resurrected Lord then makes us people of the light in a world that too often would rather hide in the darkness of sin and death. The theologian, Søren Kierkegaard once wrote the root reason the world objects to living in the light by following the Risen Jesus Christ is not that the world doubts him like Thomas once did. "The objections against Christianity (and Christ) spring from insubordination, the dislike of obedience, rebellion against all authority." "Too often the world sees God as a vindictive tyrant, eager to punish, so it rebels. But the truth is according to I John, God is the loving heavenly Father to whom self-acknowledged sinners may turn to for repair. "It is very important," said the Reformer John Calvin, "to be quite sure that when we have sinned there is a reconciliation with God ready and prepared for us. Otherwise we shall always carry hell about within...[for] hell reigns where there is no peace with God." "Unlike human beings, who can be either heartlessly rigorous or loyal to a fault, in God fidelity and justice are one; forgiveness is offered us, not because we prove ourselves humble or well intentioned, but because mercy has been built into the structure of reality by its Creator and Judge, whose kindness toward us is utterly reliable." Because of the atoning blood and resurrection of Jesus, those of us who respond by seeking and finding the deep spiritual fellowship with God in Jesus Christ, become people of the light in a world of darkness. And, oh how this world needs more people of light. TNIB Vol. X
pg. 391

Today, we have heard a variety of responses we can make to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are in no particular order or by any means a complete list. But respond we must.