

WELCOME

Grace and Peace be with you in the name of our Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit.

Thank you for coming! We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today.

It gives me great joy to tell you that
First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life is
a church with full real life standing in the
Southern California Nevada Conference of the
United Church of Christ (UCC).

Our service will be in voice and text.
Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have your voice and media
turned on.

If you don't know how to do that, let someone know and we'll try to help.
There will be a link in Nearby Chat so you can watch it in your browser if the
viewer isn't working for you.

If you would like a bulletin for today's service you can find it in the red binder
in the back along with a donation bowl.

And as a real UCC church, we'd like you to know that
"No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey,
You are welcome here.

One of the blessings and responsibilities that come with
our being a real church with real standing is that we, like all UCC churches,
support the work of the national church not only with prayer
but financially.

So we greatly appreciate any offering you can make to support this ministry.
If you prefer, donations can be made on our website, firstuccsl.org.

My name is Rev. Yadi Martínez-Reyna, I am one of the Pastors in this community.
And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

Today is the Second Sunday of Easter
Last Sunday we had a great gathering with our community and all of our Pastors in
attendance.
I was beaming in joy at the celebration of resurrection Sunday and all of us here.
We pray for our co-pastors and our board and leaders of First UCC in Second Life as
we continue to follow the call in our lives.

If you have any messages to share with our community as this song plays please feel
free to type below.

And now lets us take a deep breath and pray.

INVOCATION:

Come Holy Spirit and fill these digital waves and our places with your Holy Spirit. We thank you for meeting us where we are and embracing all of our bodies, minds, and challenges with your love and compassion.

May you lead us into a time of worship, reflection and hope.

We pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen

GATHERING MUSIC

Lee Ann Womack - I Hope You Dance (Official Music Video)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RV-Z1YwaOiw>

SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from the book of John 20:19-31 (The Message)

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the Jews, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

Then he showed them his hands and side.

The disciples, seeing the Master with their own eyes, were awestruck. Jesus repeated his greeting: "Peace to you. Just as the Father sent me, I send you."

Then he took a deep breath and breathed into them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said.

"If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

But Thomas, sometimes called the Twin, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We saw the Master."

But he said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the room.

This time Thomas was with them. Jesus came through the locked doors, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

Then he focused his attention on Thomas.

"Take your finger and examine my hands. Take your hand and stick it in my side. Don't be unbelieving.

Believe."

Thomas said, "My Master! My God!"

Jesus said, "So, you believe because you've seen with your own eyes. Even better blessings are in store for those who believe without seeing."

Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book.

These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it.

The Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God

Will you pray with me?

God of many names, we come before you to explore this passage of John together.

We thank you for your gospels, those stories left for us to read.

I ask that you touch these lips of clay to mold them to be words that share the good news of your love.

Amen.

SERMON - What Peace? What Hope?

I have preached on this particular chapter of John before.

I love the way that these sacred words have so much to explore.

This time around as I prayed about these sacred words, what kept coming up in my heart was Thomas' lack of belief and the startling reality of how hard it must have been to keep hope alive.

The scripture recounts a moment of doubt when Thomas declared that he needed to see the nail marks in Jesus' hands and touch his side to believe.

He said, "Unless I see the nail holes in his hands, put my finger in the nail holes, and stick my hand in his side, I won't believe it."

How many of us can relate with Thomas?

In a world where the term "Christian" is often used so casually, its significance has diminished.

Many identify as Christians yet adhere to a set of rules not to drink, dance or do other questionable things but yet neglect the core principle of loving one's neighbor.

So Christ comes in where the disciples are hiding and says "peace be with you."

He brings with him transformative gifts, not of material nature, but rather gifts that have the power to change lives.

These blessings are not exclusive to the disciples; they are also extended to each of us, inviting us to embrace the same peace and transformation.

They are the gifts of presence, moments when Christ appears to join them in their

hiding places.

Whether concealed behind closed doors in a physical sense or retreating within their own minds, both forms of hiding exist.

In our most vulnerable moments, Jesus meets us in the shadows, behind closed doors, alongside those who share our fears.

How often has He come to our own places of refuge?

This brings us to the invaluable gift of community, where fear can manifest collectively among those who are also seeking solace.

Right now, countless individuals—immigrants, transgender people, those with mental disabilities, and those lacking access to health care—find themselves in similar hiding places, yearning for peace.

It is in these moments, that Christ is there before each of us, offering words of comfort, yet like Thomas, many of us struggle to believe in the promise of peace.

What peace, indeed?

Jesus offers the gift of sight, revealing His presence as alive and tangible.

In our contemporary lives, how do we perceive the authenticity of Jesus? Is it possible to have faith without the physical senses of touch, sight, smell, or sound?

There may indeed be a path to belief.

Yet, I find myself resonating with Thomas, struggling to accept the name of Christ when it is often wielded to justify suffering, pain, and hatred in the name of God.

The reality of Christian nationalism raises doubts, and the staggering statistic of 40 million people—57% of Americans—who have distanced themselves from church attendance speaks volumes.

The reasons for this disconnection are complex; many express fatigue with mere discussions and seek genuine action beyond sporadic charitable acts.

While some yearn for tangible change, others simply desire basic human decency and respect.

Ultimately, the factors that repel individuals from the church can be as diverse as those that draw them to faith, but one truth remains clear: belief cannot be rooted in fear.

Episcopal Priest, Theologian and author Barbara Taylor Brown left the church at one point.

She called it “compassion fatigue.”

She said in order to retain her faith she had to leave the church she was serving at that point.

She said that the “overwhelming dysfunction of organized religion” took its toll. How many of us can relate to that?

Rev. Dr. Brown found her hope, her faith again in the connection to earth, and the beauty of the animals around the forest.

Is there a place to retreat to find your faith?
For me it is in my art.

Friends, organized religion has roots that trace back to the time of Christ, though it wasn't referred to as such; it was simply a way of life intertwined with cultural lineage.

To illustrate this, we can look at the Pharisees and Sadducee's, whom Jesus often criticized for prioritizing rigid rules over the compassion and humanity of those affected by those rules.

The scriptures we read highlight a moment when the Romans influenced Jesus' own people to betray him, driven by fear of Roman retribution, leading them to overlook his humanity.

Despite everything, Jesus was crucified, and perhaps the disciples feared being implicated by association, prompting them to seek refuge in hiding.

The disciples probably did not know who to trust at that time!

This sentiment resonates with us during our own times of profound loss and sorrow, when discerning who is genuinely supportive can be challenging.

Do we confide in those who might downplay our fears, urging us to simply move on? Or do we turn to those who, despite their good intentions, bombard us with scripture and platitudes that fail to provide comfort?

Trusting those who may not fully grasp our pain, yet attempt to fix things rather than listen, can be equally daunting.

In their shared experience of grief, the disciples found solace in one another, retreating behind closed doors, united by their collective anguish and fear.

This may explain why I perceive this space not as a traditional organized religion, but as a vibrant community of faith.

It thrives on a digital platform where avatars from around the globe unite, transcending geographical boundaries. People woven together by the Holy Spirit, forming a unique network that exists in a shared spiritual realm.

Jesus appeared to the disciples bestowing the gift of the Holy Spirit—a moment that should have ignited their spirits like a surge of energy.

Yet, eight days later, they remained in hiding, prompting questions about their hesitation.

While Christ granted them life and healing, it was not a simple solution.

Perhaps they were still in the process of strategizing, or maybe they began to reach out to others in their community who needed support.

In times of uncertainty, it may be wise for us to follow their example, recognizing that when the world feels overwhelming, retreating to plan and support one another can be a vital step toward survival and resilience.

Life may have unfolded differently for many, yet we are called to embrace the abundance that Jesus offers us.

This leads us to the concept of hope.
What kind of hope did the disciples possess?

It was the hope of experiencing Jesus' presence, as He moved among them, affirming His existence even when unseen.

Thomas, however, needed tangible proof; he sought to touch and witness the miracle for himself.
Jesus did not chastise him for his doubt, and I believe He extends the same grace to us.

He proclaimed that those who believe without seeing are blessed.

Yet, in our contemporary world, blind faith is often insufficient.
We are encouraged to explore and test our beliefs, particularly regarding the Trinity, as faith invites inquiry and understanding.

1 Thessalonian 5:19-22 says, "DO not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil."

Dr. Yara González-Justiniano who is Assistant Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture with emphasis in Latinx Studies at Vanderbilt University in her book *Centering Hope as a Sustainable Decolonial Practice: Esperanza en Práctica* (2022), restless with answering the question of what does hope look like.

Dr Yara says, hope is made of Trust, Absence, Void and Promise.

in the last Hispanic Scholars Program Exchange Webinar.
She said, "Hope is made of Trust in something.
Hope is made of Absence to know I have to go look for something.
Hope is made of the capacity to imagine.
Hope is made of the promise to know that the voice is vast and the gap is wide so we hold onto each other and the promise of each other in community."

Hope is:
Absence, Trust, Capacity to imagine, and Promise.

The disciples were called to place their faith in Jesus, even as Thomas needed tangible proof by touching His wounds to believe.

They faced the challenge of envisioning a future without their Messiah and had to embrace the promise of the Holy Spirit that awaited them.

Resilience is not just about enduring; it's about nurturing hope and striving to thrive rather than merely survive.

As circumstances shift, we must adapt to prevent our emotions from overwhelming us. It's essential to release the burdens that hinder our progress, allowing us to embrace growth and transformation.

Another way to perhaps look at hope is as Dr. Machado, the Executive Director of the Hispanic Scholars program explains in these two little parts of a poem. Hope is like a bird. Hope is like a sewer rat.

Lets listen:

Have a listen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cXJ8udOP7YA>

Which one of these can help you see hope in your life?

Whether you identify with the eager disciples longing to see Jesus or with Thomas, who seeks tangible proof of faith, you are part of a cloud of witness that is vast and connected.

I invite you church to Embrace the unwavering hope that propels you toward wholeness, bringing a joy so profound that, despite the challenges life presents, we are not merely surviving but truly thriving.

May you see hope alive in your life.

You are not alone.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God!

PRAYER PREPARATION:

We have come to the time where we come together in prayer.

Let us give thanks for the gift of this day
and pray for the life of the world.

If you have a prayer of joy or concern that you wish to lift to God, and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, we invite you to share.

As this song plays, in the silence of our hearts or type your request in the nearby chat.

Ryan Stevenson - Eye of the Storm (feat. GabeReal) [Acoustic]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Yy1f6VjDHU>

COMMUNITY PRAYER

If there was a prayer inside of you that you couldn't quite get out, it's ok.

Because the Psalmist tells us that God knows what we are going to say before the words can even form on our tongues.

And so we know.

We know that God has heard our prayers.

Those spoken out loud, those typed into SL chat, and those spoken only in the silence of our hearts.

PASTORAL PRAYER -

God of the table, Meet us as we gather. As we recline at the table, help us to make space to delight in the sacred community we've been given.

Pause time and allow the sacredness of the moment to be realized.

Remind us that it's not laughter alone that is the cure, but laughter shared—joy in community, saving our people again and again.

Keep us from becoming too serious. Let our children watch us delight in each other, tease each other, embrace each other.

And may this table be the site of memory, passed down from generation to generation, that our children would learn the sound of their own laughter in us.

Right here.

Amen. Title: Black liturgies / Cole Arthur Riley.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Our worship is over

our ministry to the world is just beginning.

The world is waiting.

Go in peace, come again in hope.

Amen.

MUSIC FOR THE JOURNEY

Let's dance!

Lady Gaga - Just Dance (Audio)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5q7byFPTehs>