

**Believe the Impossible<sup>1</sup>**  
**April 11, 2010**  
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**Westhampton Congregational United Church of Christ**

Were you ever *afraid* as a teenager? I sure was. I was afraid I wasn't good enough, or brave enough, or handsome enough, and the list of insecurities went on and on... In Junior High there was one particular fear that really hung over me. I was afraid that any given day would be *that day*—the day when I would get the tar beat out of me and I would be left in a heap in some random school hall. It is what I had been trained to expect. I was told that being “reamed on” as we called it was just part of growing up—not just a possibility, but a probability.

I literally shook some days when I saw certain upper classmen walk by. We all knew which boys were most likely to do the reaming. We all accepted it as a regular part of life, *since no one ever stopped it*. What we humans all create together as possible, probable, or inevitable has a way of digging a deep place into our collective understanding. We really build our reality together.

There has been more and more information surfacing lately about how much the opinions of our peer group impact our individual development. I know how much it affected *me* as a kid. I was convinced that the bullying that was always right around the corner was just part of life... I came to expect it, and I braced myself to endure it. It became not only possible, but likely... not just an idea, but a reality.

I am grateful that I never encountered all the extra threats kids face today. Nowadays you can't leave bullying behind at school anymore, because it can follow you home. There is cyber bullying in computer sites like Facebook and chat rooms. These modern methods of communication also infiltrate the ways we construct shared reality. They also teach what is possible, probable or real. If you see your name in print associated with negative things often enough, you are likely to begin believing negative things about yourself, which can lead to all sorts of bad choices in response.

It appears to have gone that way for Phoebe Prince. I imagine we have all heard something of her tragic story. A number of classmates allegedly bullied her for dating boys they liked. The story goes that they called her abusive names when they passed her in the halls or cornered her in

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the examples of practicing resurrection toward the end of the sermon were inspired by/lovingly ripped off from Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat at <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/days/features>. Many of the themes are derived from my weekly Bible study meetings with area clergy. Many thanks to all these mentors.

school bathrooms. Things escalated. In addition to their face to face encounters during school, it is alleged that they also assaulted her on websites. I believe it is undisputed that on the last day of her life a number of her classmates drove by Phoebe, hurling insults *and sodas*, and suggested that she kill herself. Over time her classmates built up one possible reality for her: that self-negation was the right course of action. And over time, Phoebe became convinced that suicide was not only possible, but appropriate; not only likely, but the right thing to do; and she made that possibility into a reality.

Now, I need to make clear that I don't think it is fair or right to blame *just* the youth who were allegedly involved in this horrible situation. It seems clear that adults bear much of the responsibility, and perhaps most of it. And, have you read the vitriolic reactions against the youth that have cropped up in public opinion, and in website commentaries? One person calling themselves "Vegas Sweetie" expressed the hope that "these tormenters are put in PRISION for the next 20 yrs they can be someones (sic) (Expletive deleted) in jail."<sup>2</sup> And the vitriol is directed toward parents, too. One commentator demanded that parents "take responsibility for your *monster* kids."<sup>3</sup> Still another person suggested water boarding the mother of an alleged perpetrator.<sup>4</sup>

Many people seem all too ready to engage in the very sort of behaviors they appear to condemn at the same time. On the one hand they want to blame certain youth for engaging in hateful cyber commentary and behavior. But on the other hand they employ the self same media and attitude to hatefully decry them. It is as though we are unable to escape from the cycle of negative expectations and expressions even when we recognize it being active in someone else. And, well, isn't that just how we humans sin? We are all too willing to condemn others; all too willing to expect the worst in any given situation; and all too willing to hold onto negative possibilities as the only possibilities.

The Apostle Thomas was caught there, too, once. Like all his ancient Jewish contemporaries, he was all too familiar with the power which the Romans held over his people. He knew how they tortured and crucified dozens or hundreds of Jews whenever they felt like it. Such messy deaths were certainly not impossible, but fully possible, terribly real, and all too common. The Romans were the bullies roaming the halls of ancient Jewish life.

So, when Jesus was handed over to them, everyone knew what to expect. Sure enough he was put on trial, tortured, hanged on a tree, pierced and left to die. All the Apostles saw him die.

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<sup>2</sup> Posted 9:10:47 PM, Apr 5, 2010 on <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national>.

<sup>3</sup> Posted by "Rolltederroll," 12:38:36 PM Apr 6, 2010, site *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Posted by SilentSub, 4:31:51 AM, Apr 7, 2010, site *ibid*.

They all expected him to die—that was simply the way of things under Rome. They all accepted it as a regular part of life, *since no one seemed able to stop it*. So when all the other Apostles told Thomas that they had seen Jesus and that he *was* alive despite all they had seen before and knew to be true, he was naturally skeptical. He declared, rather brazenly, that he would need to touch Christ’s wounds to really believe that he had risen from the dead. He would need evidence that this impossible thing might be able to happen.

Well, he sure got it, didn’t he? Jesus addressed his concerns directly when he arrived on the following Sunday and appeared to *all* the remaining Apostles. After wishing peace upon them, he said:

“Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. *Do not doubt but believe.*”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus was saying *believe* Thomas...believe the impossible...believe that there is something more than the sorrow which you feel. Believe that death and suffering and oppression *don’t* get the last word after all...believe that God loves you enough *to offer new possibilities*, and to invite you into *the world of resurrection*.

When we listen too closely to what the world tells us about life, such a world surely seems impossible. Which is why we need to keep reminding each other that “for God *all things* are possible!”<sup>6</sup> By and large we forget that. Most often we stand firmly with Thomas demanding to touch or dwell on old wounds rather than to embrace new possibilities and new truth. We continue to do things as they always have been done, just because we have always done them that way. We do not generally live as though resurrection is possible.

Yet the testimony of our faith is that resurrection is not just *possible*, and not *just* some nice idea to talk about on Sunday mornings, but fundamental to life. And we are overrun with evidence of this. Evidence we can see and touch as well as evidence beyond our usual senses. Every year apparently dead branches blossom, bringing abundant life back to barren landscapes. Every day people undergo life changing operations, receive new organs or replacement hips which let them walk into a new life they may never have thought possible. Every hour people who have struggled in challenging relationship for weeks, months or years, find their ways into new understanding and begin new lives.

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<sup>5</sup> John 20:27b-c.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 19:26c.

And in every minute of every day, when we center ourselves in God's presence, we create opportunities to practice resurrection in all the lives we touch. When we engage the pain of the world with open hearts and souls, we create space for people who are suffering to begin their own healing. That's resurrection! When we pray for others as part of our daily lives, we are practicing resurrection. When we embrace joy by laughing, singing, and otherwise loving life, we are embodying resurrection in the face of sorrow, and modeling God's presence in our lives. That's resurrection, too. When we forgive someone, we start another resurrection. When we experience those fleeting and delicious moments of grace and see it in the world around us, we practice our own resurrection. When we speak hope to despair; when we bring healing to conflict; when we support others who need our help—we share the resurrection with others!

When we allow our imaginations to lead us away from fossilized adherence to the past and toward new possibilities, we might just see the risen Christ right in front of us, inviting us into the resurrection! When we care for our bodies by eating right, exercising, and finding plenty of rest despite busy lives, we help God to resurrect our body even amid our 24/7 go, go, go culture! There are hundreds of ways to practice and embrace resurrection and the list of possibilities goes on and on. And we can all take part. And as Christians we are called to do so.

Now, I anticipate that some of us might be wondering why these examples take place among and between human beings. There is often a supposition that resurrection is about God's work among us, and that it is somehow out of our hands. But as Christ demonstrated time and again in his teaching, healing, preaching and miracles—it is precisely through human hands that God works. And we are Christ's Body in the world today. So, the resurrection is in *our* hands.

So, my question for us this morning is this: are we up to it? Are we ready to build new possibilities out of the tired old ones which have led so many people into misery, or suffering, or at least a dullness of spirit? Are we ready to believe the impossible, and practice resurrection in the face of the world's doubt? Are we ready to build a new and better reality for everyone to share? Because, as Christians we are called to do so. And we are called to proclaim it to the world, too.

Just this week, our church was filled to capacity. Not on Easter Sunday, as we may well hope, but at Eileen Loud's memorial. I am grateful that we could serve the town that way, and it was a powerful moment of community sharing. But it got me wondering why we aren't full every Sunday morning, too. Or any Sunday morning that I have been here. We are a great church. I really love us. Plus, we celebrate good news, don't we?

We celebrate the good news that there is something more than the sorrow which we all feel from time to time. We celebrate the faith that death and suffering and oppression *don't* get the last word after all...and that God loves us all enough *to offer new possibilities*, and to invite everyone

into *the world of resurrection*. And it is our job to spread the word and share this amazing good news. We are called to go forth and make disciples of the nations. That is a tall order. A daunting task. So, in this season of Eastertide, in this season of resurrection, let's begin with this town,  
Amen?

**John 20:19-29**

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

"Sometimes when you open your mind to the impossible, you find the truth"

—Dr. Walter Bishop, *Fringe*, 4/8/10 episode.