

**SERMON**  
**The Second Sunday of Easter 2018**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**

*According the Gospel of Matthew (27:51-53), after the crucifixion*

*“the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After the resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.”*

In preparation for the centennial celebration of Epiphany Chapel & Church House on June 3, and with this biblical account in mind, today we welcome a guest who lived 100 years ago and served with the troops in the trenches of France. You may wonder why we have this “special guest” tradition at Epiphany. I suppose, in part, because it is fun—and a good break after the strenuous schedule of Holy Week and Easter Sunday. Probably more of a reason is that the gospel reading for this Sunday is ALWAYS the story of “Doubting Thomas” and truth be told, it is this story from the Gospel of John that was the focus of my seminary thesis, and I love it! I have studied this story, upside down and backwards. The Gospel of John is wonderful in so many ways—but for someone like me who loves theater—I’d say it is the most beautifully crafted of all the Gospels—AND, as my thesis proposed, it was written to be performed—not just read. It *begs* to be performed. This passage, the Doubting Thomas story, is the final scene, and includes the punchline to the whole play—the final message for the audience. The original Gospel of John ended with this story. The chapters that follow were added at a later date. Here, Jesus appears to his disciples in the upper room, with the doors locked. But Thomas is not there. Thomas hears about their experience but says that he will not believe unless he touches the wounds and sees Jesus for himself. The next time they gather, Thomas is there when Jesus enters the room, again. This time, Jesus invites Thomas to put his hand in his side and to believe. It is then that Thomas professes him as Lord. The punch line to the story, however, is this:

*Blessed are those who have not seen but believe.*

You see, the house lights have come on. The point of the story is not about those on the stage, but those in the audience. Us! We discover that it is for us that this story has been told. It is for us that the Gospel writer has written this gospel, the Good News of God in Christ. This year, the lens through which I invite us to hear this story is this: Believing in Jesus, having the resurrected Jesus experience, a life-changing relationship—is always personal. I don’t mean that it is individual— faith is rarely an experience apart from the community of the faithful—It is in community that our faith is shaped and nurtured. It isn’t individual, but it is always personal. One of the many things we might learn from the Doubting Thomas story, is that Christianity, that our faith, that our believing, is not an abstraction. It is not a philosophy among other philosophies. It is not theoretical— It is not even a theological doctrine or a dogma. It is real. It is something that can and must be touched, lived, experienced. Shared. Talked about. Courageously lived out. It is first a gift. Something given—through other people, though relationships, and experiences. Then it is received and realized. It is remembered. It is retold. It shapes and informs the way we live our lives and the decision we make. It is cherished and shared. Perhaps it is enough to say, Faith is always personal. It can and must be touched and seen, because it is real.

In my early years of training, I spent a great deal of time in hospitals. I worked with Elizabeth Kugler-Ross, author of “On Death and Dying.” While studying in NYC I watched autopsies at Bellevue Hospital. I once volunteered to help with a suicide study by being the person who did the initial interview with people who had attempted to hurt themselves. A supervisor suggested that I was a “Doubting Thomas” because, he said, “I had to touch in order to believe that life was real.” I think he was right. Listening to real stories about people’s lives—is like touching …and results in being touched, moved, experiencing—and finally, in believing. Life and death is always personal. Faith is personal, too.

So today, in preparation for the centennial commemoration of Epiphany Chapel & Church House, you are invited to touch in order to believe—to hear the story of a woman who lived and served in WWI.

From a medical standpoint, WWI was a miserable and bloody affair. In less than a year the American armed forces suffered more than 318,000 casualties, of which 120,000 were deaths. When the United States entered the war in 1917, the Army did not have an established medical corps. During the war, the army copied parts of the French and English medical system that had been in use for the past three years.

- Stretcher-bearers first came into contact with the wounded and moved them from trenches to waiting ambulances.
- Ambulances rushed them to mobile dressing stations or field hospitals.
- From there the severely injured were taken to base hospitals far behind the lines.
- There were four kinds of cases: gas injuries, shell shock, diseases, and wounds.

Women as well as men cared for the injured and ill. Thousands of women volunteered as nurses. Their skillful care saved many lives and they reminded the injured of their mothers, wives, girlfriends and sisters back home. I'd like to introduce you to Helen Fairchild. She was an American nurse who served as part of the American Expeditionary Force whose wartime letters to her family vividly depict the realities of combat nursing. She died of post-operative complications after surgery for a gastric ulcer while on duty with British base hospital #10 on the Western Front. She volunteered for front-line duty for the Third Battle of Ypres—Passchendaele(which by the way, is from where we have purchased the iron poppies made by Belgium blacksmiths)—and moved to a casualty clearing station in Dozinghem. She was exposed to heavy shelling and the use of mustard gas.

Dear Mother,

The wind is whistling around the hut. I do not mind the rain so much, but the wind makes me cross, and it blows a perfect gale, even in perfect weather. You should see our clothes, no fancy things for us. I have 2 rain hats and 2 raincoats and a pair of rubber boots, so we never stay in on account of rain. One soldier said, "I didn't know American girls were so ugly."

Dear Mother,

I am with an operating team about 100 miles from our own Base Hospital, closer to the fighting lines. I'll sure have a lot to tell about this experience when I get home. We all live in tents and wade through mud to and from the operating room where we stand in mud higher than our ankles.

Dear Mother,

Just as soon as I get home I am going to get dresses all colors of the rainbow, but never again blue serge or a blue felt hat. Another of our operating team left for a place further up the lines this am. Rained some last night and is frightfully windy and cold. I put on some woolen clothing for we do not have any fires in the hut yet, but in spite of two pairs of stockings my feet are cold. Right now I stopped writing and got two hot water bottles and have my feet on one and the other in my lap. Please write letters often, they mean more to me than a package, for I get a little homesick sometimes.

Heaps and heaps of love and a big kiss to everyone,

Your very own, Helen.

Dear Mother,

Being sick this far from home is no fun, but everyone has been fine to me.

Gee but I'll be glad to see you all by the time this war is over, but at the same time I am glad to be here to help take care of these poor men, and I'll be doubly glad when our own U.S. boys will be with us, for they will be so far from home, and they will have no one but us American nurses to really take any genuine interest in them, for their own friends will not be able to reach them.

Heaps of love, your very own, Helen.

War Department

Office of the Surgeon General

Washington, D.C.

January 24, 1918

Dear Mr. Fairchild,

It is with regret that I have to inform you of the death of your daughter, Miss Helen Fairchild, RN on January 18, 1918, while on duty with Base Hospital #10, American Expeditionary Forces, France.

D.E. Thompson, Superintendent Army Nurse Corps.

Life is always personal. And so is war. In preparation for the centennial commemoration of this chapel, let's remember to make it personal. The United States entered WWI on April 6, 1917. The armistice was declared on November 11, 1918. During the war the U.S. mobilized over 4 million military personnel and suffered 110,000 deaths, including about 45,000 who died from Influenza. Each person had a story. Each person had a family back home. Every story, for every family, is personal. *Keeping the faith* now, means taking the time to get personal. To touch and to be touched. To remember and to experience.

In the pews are cards and pens. You are invited to share the names of family members who lived during WWI. Those who were deployed. Those who were at home. Keeping the faith means doing the remembering—remembering those who fought and those who supported them. On June 3 we will share these stories, through records and pictures many of which are available through online research. Just give us their names, their birth date, any information you have. We are their families. These stories belong to us. Touch them. They are real. Life and faith is always personal.

AMEN.