



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## ***Faith and Paradigm***

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

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In 1962, Rachel Carson published her book *Silent Spring*. It wasn't her first book, but it certainly is the one we remember. She wrote about the destructive effects and unintended consequences of the broad application of pesticides, particularly DDT. As these poisons worked their way into the food chain, they began to weaken and damage entire ecosystems, affecting particularly bird populations. She began the book with a fable that described a world devoid of the song of birds, a silent spring. While other scientists were observing and writing on the same phenomena, it was Rachel Carson's voice that people heard.

On the 50th anniversary of *Silent Spring*, the New York Times published several articles on Rachel Carson and her role in the birthing of the environmental movement. Author Eliza Griswold wrote, "Carson believed that people would protect only what they loved, so she worked to establish a "sense of wonder" about nature." She succeeded. She inspired Carl Safina when he was just a teenager. He is now an award winning author and a professor of Marine Biology, and host of a PBS series on *Saving the Oceans*. He remembers reading *Silent Spring* in the back seat of the family car. He said, "I almost threw up. I got physically ill when I learned that ospreys and peregrine falcons weren't raising chicks because of what people were spraying on bugs at their farms and lawns. This was the first time I learned that humans could impact the environment with chemicals. No one had ever thought that humans could create something that could create harm all over the globe and come back and get in our bodies."

There were many people and interests that did not want to believe or be swayed by what the scientists were saying about pesticides. The response to Rachel Carson was swift, ugly and personal. "She was accused of being a communist sympathizer and dismissed as a spinster with an affinity for cats." They said worse things as well, accusing her of treasonous affiliations and intent. To this day, she is accused of causing millions of deaths worldwide to malaria and other insect borne diseases.

But Rachel had stirred the waters sufficiently and enough people believed what she and the other scientists were saying. The use of DDT was eventually discontinued in the US and now nearly world-wide. We have escaped the specter of a silent spring, at least for now. The environmental movement gained momentum. But the drama is repeating itself today in the debate over fracking, the use antibiotics in chickens and beef cattle, the effects of pollution and the food we eat on our health, it goes on. Disbelief is driven by a number of factors.

Thomas had been a courageous disciple. He was the one in the story of Lazarus who wanted to follow Jesus back to the outskirts of Jerusalem, where his life had been threatened,. He said, "Let us go, that we may die with him!" I think that Thomas' love and commitment to Jesus was so strong, his belief in Jesus' message, power and potential so complete, that he had invested his whole heart in it, in Jesus. But suddenly Jesus was dead and Thomas must have felt that all of the reasons for his faith had been dashed. His faith was now a thing of gullibility and foolishness. He would not open himself to that disappointment again, without darn good reason. Even when it was his closest companions telling him

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the extraordinary news, he wasn't going to set himself up for such a let down again. He wasn't stubborn, he was protecting his heart.

We can imagine how the early followers of Paul's mission must have felt when he was telling them that Jesus would be returning soon. Eventually he had to help them figure out why it had not happened and how to keep them in the faith without the ultimate demonstration. Soon, doubt made sense to them.

Another reason for Thomas' refusal to believe may have come from what we now call a paradigm. A paradigm is a deeply embedded way of understanding the world around you, how things work, why they work. It is the way you think things are. When something fundamental is challenged it is very difficult to overcome and shift into a new way of understanding. Here's a perfect example. Until the 1960s, the Swiss had a near-monopoly on watch making. They were very good at the precision work. A Swiss technician developed a new way of making watches, it was a quartz mechanism. The industry looked at it and completely rejected it because that just wasn't how a watch worked. They couldn't see the value. But Seiko did and the paradigm of watch shifted very quickly, in favor of Japanese companies. The Swiss watch industry collapsed. That's what happens when a paradigm shifts. If you cannot make the leap, you are left behind. Here are a couple of other historic paradigm shift rejections. In 1927, the head of Warner Brothers studios said, "Why would anyone want to hear actors talk?" In 1872 it was said that "Louis Pasteur's theory of germs is ridiculous fiction." French military giant Marshall Foch once said, "Airplanes are interesting toys but of no military value." An internal memo in the Western Union archives stated, "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."

Galileo produced one of the greatest paradigm shifts in human history; his insistence that the earth orbited the sun was a threatening game changer to everyone, particularly the church. What this did to ordinary people was unsettling. With their eyes, they could see the sun move across the sky. They certainly didn't feel the earth moving beneath their feet. And besides, their church told them that it wasn't true. Eventually, all that had been considered true was shown to be false. Perhaps, Thomas was having a similar experience. His understanding of the world and how life worked played out in a birth, life, death model of mortality and perhaps it required too much of a shift to believe that we are spiritual beings having a human experience, one that doesn't end with death.

When something challenges everything that you know, what do you do? We look around and see ourselves as separate distinct beings and yet the Christ message is one of unity, we are all a part of a whole, the Body of God. We are one people who different from us, different colors, sizes, backgrounds, languages. The message of Jesus is that no one is better than anyone else. To embrace such a message, we have to alter our image of ourselves and of others and that is not easy. People had a really hard time accepting that women could be priests because it just didn't fit with what had always been said. How long is it going to take for resistance to every other expression of human variety to be overcome?

Rachel Carson brought the message of interconnectedness and responsibility for our actions. We still have difficulty believing it or wanting to believe it. It's a lot of work to change our buying and eating habits, to change our water consumption, to drive less and all of the other things that contribute to the planet's distress.

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But we are a people who are together to overcome disbelief and denial. We are together to build the prototype of heaven on earth. This morning we welcome two children to join us in this mission. We have a lot to share with them, particularly our willingness to struggle with the challenges of following Jesus. Jesus came and showed us a whole new way to understand what it means to be a child of God. One possibility today is that we just let these babies teach us a thing or two about love, joy and wonder. They are here unimpressed with things that the world says are important. They will lead us into the new paradigm if we let them.

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