

## **Second Sunday of Easter April 19 2020**

### **John 20:19-31**

The resurrection story in the Gospel of John starts with Mary Magdalene going to the tomb on that Easter morning only to find it empty. She ran back to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple to tell them someone took Jesus from the tomb. They come, see the empty tomb, and leave not knowing what to think. It is after they go, that Mary encounters the risen Christ. She runs to the disciples and tells them she has seen the Lord. As in all the gospels, it is the women who were the first apostles. The first ones sent to proclaim the resurrected Christ. Makes one wonder about the argument against women pastors and proclaimers!

Our reading this morning picks up right after this message from Mary to the disciples. The disciples are locked in the house, isolated from the world out of fear for what they will encounter. Knowing that as followers of Jesus- injury, death could await them out there.

But I wonder if that is the only reason they are shut away. They have just experienced a major shock. They had expected Jesus to be the Messiah. The one who would come and free them from Roman oppression, the one who would restore the Jewish nation to glory. The one who would raise up the worship of the One True God! And they would be part of this. It would be hard, to be sure, but the power, might, and glory of the Messiah would overcome anything!

The experience of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday just cemented their beliefs. The way he tweaked the temple authorities and pleased the crowd.

Yes, Israel would be great again! At the expense of the hated Roman Empire. The disciple's thoughts surely had turned to the future and their role in it.

Then, within days, came Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In less than 24 hours their dreams were not just broken but shattered beyond recognizing. Jesus was dead, his body missing, and Mary was hallucinating he was raised.

I wonder if they were locked away also because they were trying to grieve what was lost, even as they were beginning to struggle with what the future would look like. What was "normal" going to be now that Jesus was dead?

They were having to reconstruct in their heads what life was going to be like. And that was best done away from the crowds. Together with those whose dreams had also been shattered.

I can sympathize with them. When I was in college I learned that my parents were divorcing. I remember going up to have lunch with my sister not long after learning about this and asking her if she had ever thought growing up that this would happen? I remember saying to someone that an idea of my future that I hadn't even known existed was now gone. It was an odd and unsettling feeling. Trying to reconstruct what the future would look like. What the new "normal" would be.

We are like those disciples, aren't we? Shut into our homes because what is outside can hurt us, even kill us. And we have lost our normal, too. The world has turned in the last weeks and I think we are all just beginning to come to grips with what that means.

We are grieving what we have lost and are losing. School, graduations canceled, weddings postponed or done in the courthouse with just bride and groom.

Birthday celebrations done from afar. Funerals with small, masked gatherings.

We are anxious- not knowing when we will get back to work and if so, what that will look like. Not knowing when a vaccine will be developed. Not knowing if we have even had the virus. Not knowing when we can socialize again in person.

We are in the midst of a radical re-thinking of our lives. One that has been forced upon us by this virus and the need to be physically distant from each other, our being detached from all those things that used to define us before- our work, our school, our activities and busy-ness, our shopping and traveling and doing.

For those of us for whom this time restricted in our movements is more annoyance than anything, it can be a time to re-consider. I've heard voiced by a parent, something I have been thinking about. This parent reflected that they were enjoying not running all over the place for their children's activities and theirs. And the thought had occurred to her that perhaps those things (at least to that extent) were not worth going back to.

Like the disciples locked inside that house on Easter eve, we are having to re-shape our future. To think again about what is most important. In the midst of the awfulness of what this virus has done and means, we have an opportunity to clarify what we want the next normal to look like- at least for us.

Into this pondering and uncertainty of the disciples comes Jesus. Despite the fear, despite the locked doors, he shows up. "Peace be with you." These words would have taken the disciples back to that meal just three nights ago when Jesus said to them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the

world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Another way of saying that last would be, “Do not let your hearts be agitated into useless motion and do not let them be timid.”

Peace be with you. And then Jesus shows them his hands and side. Showed them that Good Friday really happened, but that it is not the end of the story. It is interesting to note that it is only after seeing those scars that the disciples see Jesus for who he was and rejoice.

Then Jesus gives them their mission. Refocuses their lives. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Their mission now is to proclaim the risen Christ. Their mission now is to live as if the Kingdom of God were here, now. Their mission is to follow that command Jesus gave them and love others as God in Jesus has loved them- with everything that they are.

This is Good News my friends, that even though we are physically separated, even though we are shut up behind our doors in fear and uncertainty, even though we may have not darkened the door of a church for years or ever, Jesus can get to us. There is nothing that will shut Jesus out. For he is present with you now, even as I speak. Standing there and saying to each of you, “Peace be with you. Still your agitated and timid hearts. Remember who I am and what I have called you to. Remember that I am with you always. Remember that the peace I give you does not mean you will not fear, but it does mean that fear will not overwhelm you, make you timid. It does not mean that things will be all peachy keen. It does mean that in the midst of trial I am with you.

And in this encounter with Christ we are given a road map for re-orienting our lives. Love each other as I have loved you. To serve others with the same

humility and passion Jesus served us. What are the ways we might re-orient our lives to recapture these values as a core part of who we are? How many of us have been helping one another more recently? Encouragement. Offering to go buy groceries. Making masks, donating blood, sharing food, skills, now that we are more restricted. What is God calling you to? What has God gifted you to do and be through the Holy Spirit? I pray that we would do this both in our households and together. So that God's Kingdom would come, would shine through just a bit in our living.

And then, there is Thomas. Who is not with the disciples, as they self-isolate. The phrasing of the Greek implies that beyond just not being present that he has left this band of believers.

Now, Thomas is a realist. He is the one who, shrugs his shoulders and says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." When Jesus returns to Judea upon hearing of Lazarus' death, despite knowing the authorities would love to kill him.

Thomas is the one who when Jesus gets too deep on Maundy Thursday just comes out and says, "We don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Perhaps his not being there just means that Thomas has adapted to the new reality quicker than the other disciples. Maybe it's just that he can't afford to dwell further on broken dreams. It's time to get busy living.

Part of me wondered in this day whether Thomas is like so many who work hourly jobs, who don't get paid if they don't work. And despite whatever fears they may have they go into the world with all its dangers because they don't have the luxury of working from home. They just need to crack on with it.

I like Thomas. I think he gets a bad rap. Thomas really doesn't do anything differently from the other disciples. He doesn't believe the first witness he hears about others seeing the Lord. He needs physical proof before he believes. But when he does see Jesus. When he sees his hands and side note well that Thomas doesn't need to follow through with what he asked for. Instead, Thomas goes all in- "My Lord and my God!" Thomas is the first disciple to recognize the divinity of Jesus.

Thomas follows in a long line of believers who wrestle with God. Jacob literally wrestles with the divine in Genesis 32. Moses needs to be convinced to be God's messenger to Pharaoh. Abraham bargains with God for the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Job calls God to account for his suffering. There are countless psalms where the author cries out to God, "What's up with this!? Surely this isn't how things should be? Where are you?"

Thomas does not doubt any more than the other disciples do, he's just bold enough to speak what the others were probably thinking. And all of these people have faith. Asking questions, wrestling with God, is part of faith. It is how we grow and learn and test our faith. It is how we come to realizations about how well we are living in accordance with God's desire.

But we need to be ready to hear the answers if we ask the questions. Sometimes the answer will come back, you can't know that. Because what we are asking, is to peer into the mind of God- to know what God knows and that seems to me to be the root of our problem in the first place. Sometimes the reply comes back- you are way off base here! And sometimes the response is- "Now that is a good question- why is it like that?"

I would invite you all, in the midst of this time behind closed doors, to be intentional about considering what the new normal will look like for you. What are the things about this time that are working for you? What are the things that feel better than the life you were living? How has this time clarified for you what is most important and what might that mean for your lives after we can move more freely?

I would also invite you to be so bold as to ask those questions of and about God and faith. It has been my practice on this Sunday to encourage folks to send me those questions that they have about God and faith. So feel free to write them in the comments or you can email them to me at [pastorstjohnely@southslope.net](mailto:pastorstjohnely@southslope.net)

I'll look over the questions I receive and starting next week at 9:30 am we'll assemble on Zoom and discuss some of these questions. If you wish to participate in that conversation please send me an email letting me know and I'll make sure you are in the Zoom invite. If you are on our e-news mailing list, you will get that invite automatically.

I pray for you my brothers and sisters in Christ- that the Holy Spirit would guide your discernment as we live into our new normal. That you and your family continue to be well. That we would all remember, that we are indeed blessed as we who have not seen firsthand the risen Christ, live our lives in the belief and hope of the Resurrection.