

April 11, 2021

Second Sunday of Easter – Year B John 20: 19-31

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Synod of Alberta and the Territories**

Text for Pre-recorded Sermon – recorded Monday, April 5, 2021

**Synod Livestream Worship
Hosanna Lutheran, Edmonton**

John 20:19-31

When 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.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So 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.'

A 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.' Then 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.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Prayer: Holy God, come among us. Breathe your Spirit of peace upon us and shape us, your wounded body, the church, that the world might see You through its scars, through Jesus Christ, our risen Savior and Lord. Amen.

Today we meet the disciples huddled together. The doors are shut and locked.

They can hardly breathe in that airless tomb. Their hearts are racing. Their minds spinning.

It was evening on that first day, the first day of the week. They had heard from Mary Magdalene that she had seen Jesus alive, that he had called her by name and turned her toward the new dawn of the empty tomb.

It was the death of Jesus that brought them together that evening, but it was not simply the death of Jesus that drew the disciples together – it was his resurrection. It was Mary Magdalene’s witness: “I have seen the Lord.”

And the doors were shut and locked.

They could hardly breathe. They were afraid of everything on the other side of those doors: afraid of the forces that killed Jesus. Afraid, perhaps, of living.

They are winded by fear. What now?

Yes, what now?

It isn’t hard for us, this morning, to imagine ourselves in that room. No, not after a year of pandemic. And not when we know for ourselves, and for others, of trauma and anxiety and fear and constant change and uncertainty and grief and losses of many kinds.

And we are ourselves hardly breathing in our airless tombs. Our hearts racing. Our minds spinning.

Last year at this time I was wondering when things would get back to normal. Maybe this was your experience too? I kept trying to convince myself that in two or three months it would all be over. I kept finding myself thinking ahead to when it was over and when we could get back to normal.

As the days turned to weeks and to months and now to over a year, I can’t imagine that after we’re beyond this pandemic that things will ever go back to normal – to the same old.

And, truth be told, dear siblings in Christ, I wonder whether we want ever to embrace fully what we once called, “normal.”

For the pandemic has exposed – it has revealed – what was always there but now seen more clearly: injustice, racial inequality, consumerism, individualism, economic disparity, the marginalization of Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and LGBTQ2SIA+ communities, plus trafficking, violence, climate crisis, polarization, xenophobia, and gender inequality. And this list could easily be added to.

Will we, can we, do we want to go back to this normal?

All of which points me in the direction of today's gospel reading and of the disciple, Thomas. This is one of the very few "fixed" stories read on the same Sunday each year. Every year on the Second Sunday of Easter we hear of Thomas.

This year, just over one year into a pandemic, the narrative speaks quite differently to me.

I know that we tend to think of Thomas in terms of his doubting, but what if that doubt were part of a larger insistence on dealing with reality, on getting things back to normal, on moving forward now that the worst has happened?

Why isn't Thomas in the house when Jesus makes his first appearance?

I wonder if unlike the other disciples, who are behind shut and locked doors, Thomas has already accepted what has happened, has moved on, and is now out and about rebuilding his life from the fractured pieces that were left to him after the horrific events of Good Friday.

We know, from this gospel according to John, that Thomas prefers things that are clear and concrete; he's the one who challenges Jesus' lofty words about going on ahead of them, saying bluntly, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (Jn 14:5). And we know he has courage – he is, after all, the one who urges the disciples to go to Jerusalem with Jesus even if it spells their deaths (Jn. 11:16).

Which is why I wonder if Thomas had already moved on by that first Easter evening – or at least was attempting to, attempting to put things back in order and get back to normal.

It would explain why it's so hard for Thomas to accept the witness of his friends: "We have seen the Lord." The joyful confession of the other disciples may have seemed like oh-so-much wishful thinking to this hardboiled realist.

Which is why, when one-week later Jesus came and stood among them, I wonder if the noticeable change in Thomas' tune is less about simply coming to faith – to belief – and more about realizing that, after the resurrection, reality itself had changed and there would be no normal to go back to.

Let me say that again: Thomas' noticeable change in tune is less about simply coming to faith and more about realizing that, after the resurrection, reality itself had changed and there would be no normal to go back to.

For how do you even talk about "normal" when someone has been raised from the dead? What can possibly be the same? Your work, your sense of meaning, your relationships, your purpose, your view of past, present, and future – all of it is changed irrevocably by God's act of resurrection.

When Thomas confesses, “My Lord and my God,” he is abandoning all his conceptions of “normal” and opening himself to a very different reality than he could have previously ever imagined.

Similarly, when Jesus affirms but also stretches Thomas’ confession – “Do you believe because you’ve seen...” – and then blesses later believers – “blessed are those who believe and have not seen” – Jesus is simultaneously challenging and inviting and blessing all of us to recognize that, in light of the resurrection, the future is always open.

The question for us in moving forward then is not: “how soon ‘till we can get back to normal?” – a question, I’ll confess, that is easy for me to get stuck on.

Perhaps the question should be, in light of the pandemic...in light, dear friends, of the resurrection of Our Lord: “what will we be free to do, try, and be in this ‘new normal’?”

What have we learned about what is most important in our life together as the body of Christ? And how can we use that knowledge to shape how we will live, work, and serve together? What might we bring into the future from this experience?

What new skills have we picked up? What other skills and gifts will we need to embrace a new future?

What were the things that seemed so important before the coronavirus crisis that we might give less attention to, or let go of altogether?

Will we turn outward and recognize the painful but essential levelling effect of the coronavirus to make us realize that we are all – as individuals, congregations, communities, countries, and humanity, and indeed, all of creation itself – intimately bound to each other and dependent on one another?

I believe, and what I am hearing across our Synod, is that we are discovering that we have the capacity to be more creative and flexible than we had imagined. In this liminal time, we are seeking to wonder, reflect, pray, discern, imagine what wants to emerge, to be birthed.

I believe, and what I am hearing across our Synod, is that we are discovering that we have the desire and willingness to work cooperatively, with innovation, and are learning together from our experiments, including our missteps, to join God in God’s mission in this world.

The future is open. God is yet at work creating, re-creating, and sustaining us to do things we could not have imagined previously.

And here is the promise for us. Here is the promise – the good news for us – today and each tomorrow: Jesus comes to us.

Jesus comes to us...yes in this time of pandemic, yes into our closed communities and our fearful hearts, into the airless tombs in which we dwell, behind the shut and locked doors.

Here is the promise – the good news: Jesus comes to us, bearing the marks of suffering and death, revealing that the body of Christ, though risen, is always wounded.

Here is the promise: Jesus comes to us, speaking a word of peace and revealing the startling truth for our present and future, that what is true of Jesus will be true for those who bear Christ's name.

Here is the good news: Jesus comes to us, with a word of forgiveness, with grace that unbinds the clenched heart, with love that loosens the power of death, with mercy that unbars the doors we shut and swings them wide open.

Jesus comes among us...and is with us amid necessary changes and faithful adaptations, calling us forward, blessing us to believe though we do not see, and promising to be with us.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

Prayer: (The Rev. Susan R. Briehl. Day 1, April 30, 2000.)

Come to us, risen Lord Jesus,
and grant us faith enough to share the good news of Easter.

Send us, filled with the breath of your Holy Spirit,
To breathe peace into fearful lives,
To love one another as we have been loved,
To welcome the stranger and make friends of enemies,
To forgive the sins that bind others to the past,
To serve, on bended knee, all in need of care;
To be your wounded and risen Body in the world
And to enter with joy God's in-breaking, startling future. Amen

As I prepared for today's sermon, I want to acknowledge my appreciation for the writings of Amy B. Hunter, Nora Gallagher, Susan Briehl and David Lose and, the preaching resource, *Feasting on the Word*. I have significantly borrowed their wisdom and insights, and their words, in the shaping of today's sermon.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide. Kentucky: Westminster John Know Press, 2008.

...in the Meantime. The Rev. Dr. David Lose. April 13, 2020.

Practicing Resurrection: A Memoir of Work, Doubt, Discernment and Moments of Grace. Nora Gallagher. New York: Random House, 2003.

Preaching this Week. The Rev. Dr. Mary Hinkle Shore. Commentary on John 20:19-31– April 8, 2018.

“Sermon for the 2nd Sunday of Easter.” The Rev. Susan R. Briehl. Day 1, April 30, 2000.

“The Courage to Ask.” The Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis. Day 1, April 28, 2019.

“The Show-Me Disciple.” Amy B. Hunter, *Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002.