

WORSHIP

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Wanting to See

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John 20:19-31

In these weeks after Easter, we have begun a sermon series called “Resurrection is the New Normal,” exploring what it means to be a people who profess faith in the resurrected Christ as we experience our own “new normal” - which has been a time in our collective life where so much has changed.

Today’s gospel story comes from John, chapter 20, verses 19-31. I will be reading from the Common English Bible translation. Listen with me for the word of the Lord:

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you don’t forgive them, they aren’t forgiven.”

Thomas, the one called Didymus,[a] one of the Twelve, wasn’t with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, “We’ve seen the Lord!” But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won’t believe.”



After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!"

Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

Then Jesus did many other miraculous signs in his disciples' presence, signs that aren't recorded in this scroll. But these things are written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Thomas wasn't there.

He wasn't there at the tomb on that first Easter morning with the women as they discovered it was empty.

He did not see what made Mary proclaim, "I have seen the Lord."

And he wasn't there, in that stuffy, locked up house, with the disciples as they sat together on that first Easter evening, trying to make sense of the news the women had shared with them about Jesus...that resurrection news that shatters our categories and re-orders our understanding of what we think is possible. Thomas wasn't there. He was, like many who grieve, in a surreal dis-belief. Dis-oriented by the reality before him. Wondering if the life he was living was really his own. So, who knows where he had gone. For whatever reason, dis-believing Thomas was not there.

And so he missed what happened that night, in that locked room. Scripture tells us that the disciples of Jesus gathered in that room for a reason. They were afraid. Afraid of what all of this meant. Afraid that, perhaps, what had happened to Jesus, could also happen to them because they had been his followers. Afraid



for their lives. Fear had sucked the air out of the room. And into the thick of that fear, Jesus walked in. He walked in, and he did something that sounds strikingly intimate to our ears, especially in these days of sheltering-in-place and separations of six feet or more. Jesus showed them his wounds, now stripped of their mortal power. And then he breathed on them, and because breath in the Bible always means life, we might say that, in that moment, he gave them new life. And there in that place, he uttered over them a new last word: Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.

Thomas missed all of that. And so, when he came back to discover that the disciples were proclaiming that they, too, had seen the Lord, he had an understandable reaction. He said he wanted to see him, too. It wasn't so much that he couldn't intellectually get his mind around the doctrine of the resurrection. We inheritors of the western Christian tradition have long freighted the story of Thomas with the baggage of so-called "doubt," thereby reducing faith to a cognitive exercise. But there was more on the line for him than that. Author Kathleen Norris reminds us that the root of the verb "to believe" really means "to give one's heart to," and Thomas had done that - he had believed Jesus, had given his heart to Jesus' mission and to his promises. He had been all in with Jesus. In other places in the gospel, it is Thomas, who listens to Jesus' teachings and asks follow-up questions about how to be a disciple in light of them, eliciting answers from Jesus that have shaped our own discipleship. "How can we follow you into an unknown future," he asks, "if we do not know the way?" To which Jesus answered, "I am the way...and the truth...and the life...". In another place, it is Thomas, and no other disciple, who pledges to die with Jesus. So Thomas' disbelief was something more holistic than the rejection of an idea. It was a heart-ache. It was real grief for Thomas. He wanted to see.

And what about us? This year, all of us experienced Easter in a different way. At our house, we tried to make the day as celebratory as possible. I pulled out a floral tablecloth and we took a family selfie in our Sunday best in front of a



vibrant, pink Azalea bush. We lit candles and had brunch and we participated in online worship. And there was joy in the singing and truth in the proclamation, but by that evening, as the sun set, so also did the grief set in, as we put our children to bed, and we began to calibrate ourselves for another week of sheltering-in-place.

Collectively, we have experienced a lot of grief in these pandemic days. Sometimes we have felt it as dis-belief, in those moments where we survey the facts and the ways our everyday lives have changed and we have caught ourselves wondering if this is really happening, if this is really our life that we are living. Sometimes we have experienced it as a discomfort over the loss of normalcy, or a gnawing feeling of disappointment as we have watched the date of our weddings, our graduations, our long-planned vacations, our so-called “non-essential” medical treatments, pass us by. Sometimes it has been what David Kessler has called “anticipatory grief” - which is the feeling we get about the future when things are uncertain. And for a few of us, it has come as we have lost loved ones, and in many cases, have not been able to be at their side when it has happened. We are, as Kessler says, grieving on both micro and macro levels - and because this collective, varied experience of heart-ache has been the context into which the joy of Easter has been proclaimed, we might find ourselves feeling a kinship with Thomas, whose dis-belief was so much more than the rejection of an idea.

Like a lot of parents of small children, I have found myself of late in a protracted nightly bedtime process with our three year-old. Now that he is in a “big boy bed” and is thus free to get out of it, he will only agree to go to sleep if I sit in the chair in his room until he finally dozes. What I have noticed over the last few months, is that once we have taken our places, he lies there staring at the cracked door, and from time to time, he will pop his curly little head up to check to see that I am there, and seeing me, he lies back down again. He knows I haven't left, because of the careful watch he keeps over the door. But it is not proof he is



looking for. It is reassurance of a presence, and of the fact that he is not in the dark alone.

When Thomas says, “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hand, and put my finger in the mark of the nails, and my hand in his side, I will not believe,” he is not asking for proof. He is asking for confirmation of a relationship that he can count on. He doesn’t just want to hear about the resurrected Lord. He wants to see him, and to be assured of the enduring presence of the one to whom he had given his heart.

“Unless I see” is a statement of a longing that all of God’s people have felt at one time or another. And, my friends, it is a faithful longing. It is a longing to see God at work in the world in the way God promises to be at work in the world. It was the longing that sent God’s people on pilgrimage, leaving behind all they had ever known to participate in God’s future. It is the one they felt acutely in the wilderness. It is this longing that animated the prophets, who called God’s people back again and again when they had gone astray. It is the longing that shows up all over the psalms, where the longing to see God is reiterated in different registers depending on the psalmist’s circumstances. “How Long, O Lord, will you hide your face from me” is as faithful a prayer as “Surely I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!” And it is this longing to see that Thomas gives voice to on behalf of us all.

We who have been in dis-belief these past few weeks have prayed that prayer in so many ways, whether we’ve actually bowed our heads or not. When we have felt heart-ache over the headlines, or frustration over feeling stuck, or when we have grown weary, and like Bilbo Baggins, felt “stretched. Like butter scraped over too much bread,” we, like Thomas, have wanted to see.

And here is what I think. I think the Jesus who showed up for Thomas is the one who shows up for us too. And not only does he show up for us, but he shows up in



the same way. He shows up into the dis-belief of these present days. Into the discomfort and the anticipation of an unknown future. Into the losses themselves, whether micro or macro. And he stands in the distances between us. He comes, not with loud fanfare, but in quiet faithfulness, and he invites us to come near, so that we might experience his enduring presence for ourselves. “Put your finger here and see my hands,” Jesus invites. “Do not dis-believe, but give your heart to this good news.” It is a different kind of Easter invitation, to be sure. There are no trumpets. There is only tenderness.

And in response to the tenderness of Jesus comes the proclamation of faith. “My Lord and my God,” we say, echoing our brother, Thomas, who walks ahead of us in the way.

My friends, we were not there on that first Easter evening, to see the risen Jesus draw near in this way. And we weren’t there, a week later, when he did so for Thomas. But we are here now. And the gospel writer assures us that this story is for those who have come to faith without seeing. And he invites us to trust that Christ’s real presence, and his word of peace extends to us. And then he urges us to let this good news send us back into the world to make it visible to others who long to see God with them in this season.

Into the context of this pandemic, you have proclaimed the Easter good news by showing up with tenderness for your neighbors. You have gotten on the phone and reached out to folks who are sheltering in place by themselves. You have texted one another Christ’s word of peace at the end of every virtual service. You have committed yourself to creative ways to meet the real hunger of those who would otherwise go without. You’ve paraded by couples getting married with shouts of joy, and lined the streets to the hospital as a show of your dedication to friends who would otherwise have to walk in for difficult treatments alone. You’ve let the Spirit translate your own longing to see Jesus in the midst of our collective dis-belief and our common heart-ache into the creative proclamation of the Easter good news: that the Jesus we have given our hearts



too is showing up here and now, in tender and unexpected ways, so that we might have life in his name.

Let us draw strength from that promise for the living of these difficult days.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

