



## Easter

### Wounded and Transformed at the Same Time

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This morning I want to spend a little time talking about the end of normal, and why the resurrection was so hard for Thomas, and for us, to understand. Then I want to tell you about the three gifts Jesus gives to Thomas and all of us who are struggling with doubt and grief right now. The gifts are:

- The gift of Peace.
- The gift of Presence.
- The gift of Proof.

Our text is:

John 20:24-31

24 Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 27 Then

he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

28 Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

29 Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

... And then, suddenly, without warning, the world changed. Plans cancelled. Routines upended. Futures uncertain. One minute, life is headed in a hopeful, even predictable direction and the next minute it takes a hard left turn and things are totally out of control. Every day brings new, more difficult realities. As the true nature and magnitude of the crisis sinks in, there is the sick feeling of dread in the pit of the stomach. Things aren't going to “just go back to normal.” Normal is no longer an option. The question-with-no-answer – “Why is this happening?” – is eventually replaced with, “What now?”

Of course I'm describing what it is like for the whole world right now in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. But I could just as easily be describing what it was like for the disciples in the days following Jesus' crucifixion.

When Holy Week arrives each year, I try to imagine what that must have been like for them: accompanying Jesus at joyful entry into Jerusalem, to angry confrontation with Temple authorities, to the emotionally charged Passover in the upper room. Then his violent arrest in the garden, unjust conviction at Pilate's palace, horrifying parade along the via delorosa and, at last, brutal crucifixion at Golgotha – the place of the skull. The only thing that could bring an end to the nightmare was Jesus' death... which, of course, was altogether different nightmare; one from which they had no hope of ever waking up.

Life as they knew it was OVER.

What happened next didn't change that. Mary Magdalene returned to the disciples from a now empty and open tomb to share the news, “I have seen the Lord!” But life as they knew it was still over. They gathered again the next Sabbath, locking the doors in fear that Jesus' enemies

would be coming for them next. Instead, Jesus himself appeared and greeted them as he always did: *Shalom alechem...* Peace be yours! And they were absolutely ecstatic!

He showed them his crucifixion wounds, still present even post-resurrection. Then he gave them a purpose and a gift. “Just as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you too,” he said. Then he breathed the breath of new life *upon* them, the breath of his own Spirit *into* them, and said, “Welcome the Holy Spirit! Whomsoever’s sins you forgive, oh, have they been forgiven! And whomsoever’s sins you retain, oh, have they been retained!”

Empowered by God’s Spirit for God’s mission, they were changed people. From that point on, nothing about their lives could ever be considered “normal.”

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Just as the shelter-in-place orders were being issued, I was scrolling through my Facebook feed looking for news. This post caught my attention. It purports to be a photo of graffiti in Hong Kong. While it may likely have been directed at the Chinese government over suppression of freedoms, it is now a prophetic word to all people.

“We can’t return to normal, because the normal that we had was precisely the problem.”

Jesus entered the world, suffered and died for the world, and was raised again from the dead so that things would NOT go back to normal. The normal the world had was precisely the problem.

Christ's work on the cross was the solution. It still is.

We don't know why Thomas wasn't with the rest of the disciples. Maybe he was paralyzed with fear, or overwhelmed by shock and grief. What we know – after 2000 years of gathering every Sunday – is that church is EXACTLY where we need to be when we are scared or grieving or both. But Thomas – like so many of us – was nothing if not a realist. Realistically, he knew it wouldn't be the same, ever again. He probably couldn't bear the thought of being with his friends if Jesus wasn't there.

Realists are often skeptics, but they can also become something worse. They can become cynics. Mental health professionals urge us to go outside, get fresh air, move our bodies, and last but not least **turn off the news** because a constant stream of bad news will wear us down psychologically. But for my money, it's not the news that is so toxic. It's all the cynical reactions to the news – the minimizing, the criticizing, the scapegoating and the mocking – that flood our so-called newsfeeds. The opposite of hope is not mere hopelessness. It's cynicism. Cynicism is the Anti-Hope that will choke out hope if it gets a chance. But thanks be to God, cynicism withers and dies when exposed to the direct light and warmth of the Gospel! *The mystery of the cross is that it protects us from nothing but sustains us in everything (James Finley).*

Fortunately for Thomas and for us, he didn't give up going to church all together. He didn't stay away from the fellowship for so long that skepticism could metastasize into cynicism. Next Sabbath he was there, even though he had come close to calling his ten friends liars for telling him that they had seen the Lord. He didn't just respond with a cynical, "I'll believe it when I see it." He was as a skeptic who required a very specific kind of proof. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

When we hear this, we usually make the assumption that what Thomas was doubting was the resurrection. But the proof he demanded suggests something else. Let's face it, Thomas didn't just *believe* in resurrection, he'd seen it! Only a short time earlier he saw Jesus call Lazarus back to life after being four-days-dead. Thomas might have even helped Martha and Mary unbind him from his grave wrappings.

For Thomas, resurrection wasn't the problem. What Thomas could not believe – would not believe without the clearest empirical proof – ***was that Jesus could be wounded and raised at the same time.***

That the resurrected Lord would be wounded and raised at the same time goes to the very core of the Resurrection Mystery. It confirms what we know by our experience (if we are being honest with ourselves) but desperately wish was not true. It confirms that the Path of Transformation is marked by great love and great suffering. It confirms that, while God neither desires nor causes suffering to come into our lives, God will most certainly *use* suffering to reveal Love, to bring forth greater Love, and to transform all things through Love. Through his life, his death, and his resurrection, Jesus shows us the path and the pattern. The author of Hebrews says that Jesus is the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith. That is, he shows us the way downward, into suffering, self-denial and surrender even into death and then leads us further into greater life – Life of an entirely different order – which we call resurrection.

The fact that Jesus is both resurrected and wounded at the same time does not mean the end of suffering, but it confirms once and forever that suffering is never meaningless. The examples of this are all around us: Victims of child abuse who go on to be child advocates, recovering alcoholics who becomes sponsors for others in recovery, people who have gone through long periods of unemployment and write books to help others facing the same thing. No one who has suffered abuse or addiction or unemployment says, "I'm glad that happened," but many can say, "I'm glad for I've become." That is God's resurrection power on full display.

Again the doors were locked, and again the Lord appears. Thomas may not have known what Jesus has been up to, but Jesus knows what is on Thomas' mind. Jesus wastes no time addressing Thomas' problem which, Jesus notes at the end, may likely be our problem too. What Jesus offers to Thomas are gifts that we too can receive in this moment of grief, confusion, and disbelief. They also contain challenges to us – commandments if you will – that we disciples must heed.

**First Jesus invites us to Receive his Peace. The implied commandment is, "Thou shalt not freak out."**

Jesus says, "Peace be with you!" three times in two appearances. This gives us a pretty good idea the look they had on their faces when Jesus shows up. This is a good time to remember that the exhortation most frequently heard in Scripture is to "Fear not," There is indeed a lot to be

afraid of. Yet Christ patiently and persistently meets us in our state of full-tilt freak out, and says, “Peace be yours.” He wants his friends to know that nothing the Romans, the Sanhedrin, or even death itself can do that is of any ultimate consequence.

If ever there was a time for Christians to model a different way of living – and of holding life – a truly global crisis is that time. We demonstrate our deep trust in God when share instead of horde, attend to our neighbor instead of just looking out for ourselves, and invest ourselves in the praying instead of blaming. *We are human, so it is understandable that we are afraid. God wants us to be liberated from the tyranny of fear (James Finley).* Now is not the time to abandon our spiritual practices, but to draw on their benefits!

Like so many others, my first response to shelter-in-place was to create a to-do list. We are so compulsive in our need to justify our existence through productivity, to create some sense of control out a situation that is clearly NOT in our control. But for me, the single greatest thing that has come out of this experience is extended time with my sons. A Junior in High School and a Freshman in College have a lot to live for, and a lot they are losing out on right now. But I know little short of a global pandemic make them actually want to go down to the neighborhood elementary school and play PIG on the cracked blacktop with their old man. That’s what peace feels like for me. I wonder what it feels like for you, and I wonder if we could get used to that feeling. I wonder if we can learn to receive the peace of God that is not dependent on our efforts.

**Second, Jesus invites us to Receive his Presence. The implied commandment is, “Thou shalt not skip church.”**

John makes a point of saying that Jesus appeared, from the very beginning, at the Sunday meetings. Why this teaching? Surely it was to encourage the future disciples to continue meeting together every Sunday and celebrate it as a Resurrection Sunday. By standing in their midst, Jesus teaches us that he should always be at the center of our life together, and that those who would look for Jesus should encounter him most reliably (though not exclusively) in among believers at worship.

Given that you are watching this on live stream, it’s obvious that I am NOT suggesting – as some headline grabbing preachers have – is that God cares more about our church attendance than about loving our neighbor through social distancing. What I AM saying is: Like Thomas, we have been called into community. That call is both a privilege and a responsibility. As one

commentator puts it, the fact that Thomas – one of the Twelve – was not present at the first post-resurrection worship service is “the single most inopportune or perhaps irresponsibly missed meeting in church history.”

So maybe a better way to express this commandment is, “Thou shalt not skip BEING the church, together, for the sake of the world.” Not surprisingly, some polls are suggesting that more unchurched people will attend Easter Sunday Services all across America than ever before. At the outset of this crisis, I was invited to a sit in on a webinar with the subtitle, “You are an online church – whether you like it or not!” And so it is! The severe mercy of the Pandemic Lockdown is that it gives us the opportunity *and the responsibility* to be as accessible to the world as we can be, even as we shelter in place and maintain social distancing.

Meanwhile, I’m hearing stories about how essential workers are having more and more people stopping by their cubicle because their colleagues know they are a person of faith and, as such, a source of light and hope. We finally have the excuse to get nosy about the welfare of others in our neighborhood. This week I saw my neighbor Sam for the first time in weeks. That’s when I found out his wife Angel was coming to the end of her battle with cancer. I offered my help again with groceries or whatever. This time he put my cell number in his phone. Covid-19 is clearing away the illusion that we can do this alone, or that we were ever meant to.

As Jesus is present with us, so we are present with the world. As we are Christ in the world, the world comes to know that God is present – not only to our anxiety and suffering but even and especially in the most desperate places – in the refugee camps, the unemployment lines, and the ERs and ICUs. Our privilege and responsibility is to be a healing presence in a traumatized world.

**Jesus offers his Peace and his Presence. Finally, Jesus invites us to Receive his Proof. The implied commandment is, “Thou shalt not be an unbeliever.”**

Jesus appears, “Then he says (immediately) to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and look at my hands, and put your hand out and touch my side; and stop being an unbeliever; be a believer!’”

Thank you, Thomas, for having asked the question we have all asked: Has Jesus really, bodily, historically, in fact and not just in devout wish or ecstatic vision, been raised from the dead?

Having received his proof, Thomas' epiphany is as startling as it is sudden. He declares, "My Lord and my God!"

This is the only time that Jesus is addressed as God in the gospels. John's entire story leads up to this moment. Christ – the Word from which all creation springs – has indeed become flesh. That the worst thing to happen in human history could become the greatest thing is proof of divine power and divine encounter. But this is not merely an idea that Thomas now accepts with his mind. By using the word "my," Thomas confirms that is a real and personal lived experience. The one he honored at Passover as his Master and Teacher is now his Lord and his God.

Jesus now offers a gentle rebuke to Thomas to help the rest of us who come after. We who were not present will be called blessed if we believe without seeing as Thomas now believes having seen. And in believing, we discover that Jesus Christ is indeed alive, is indeed present, and that we are indeed forgiven people who get to proclaim forgiveness to the world.

## **Conclusion**

Every person living through this pandemic will be changed by the experience – at least we hope so! Would that we could all say, with Dostoyevsky, "I do not believe as a child does; my Hosanna has passed through the crucible of doubt."

Let us now receive the gifts of the Wounded Healer: The Peace that surpasses understanding, the Presence that is with us even in the deepest darkness, and the certain proof that that there is Life on the other side. Amen.

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