

It has been a meaningful but trying time for our church in these past weeks. Many of us have felt a bit like Thomas the apostle, who could not believe in the good news of Jesus' resurrection after losing such dear church members. Kate addresses this in her message preached on the Second Sunday of Easter from John 20:19-31.

It was the fourth day of the Easter season as I began this message. We'd celebrated Betty Collins' memorial service the day before, that morning we heard of Inez Feurtado's death, was about to meet with Shelly Gilpatrick to plan Lillian's memorial, and were getting ready to set out to Newport, Vermont for a service for Sid Toll. Four beloved people of this faith community had died within a matter of days. Three in one week – all active members of this church for fifty years or more. I was in a more than usually reflective mood. The church was sad and reeling from all this loss, and my prayers tended to start with "Oh dear God, what are you doing with us now?"

I moved on to the readings. And right in the first line are the sad and reeling disciples behind locked doors out of fear of reprisal after Jesus' death. I imagine their prayers started a bit like mine. "Okay God, what now?" But then Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." The story continues: "After he said this he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced..."

A most striking aspect of this story for me is that for his disciples to be assured that it was Jesus among them, he had to show them **signs of his suffering**. His face, his eyes, his hands wouldn't suffice. He needed to show them nail marks and a pierced side. Usually we are so busy focusing on the guy who wasn't there, Thomas, that we jump over these important details, and what they mean. When Thomas is told the news that his friends have seen him, it is not Jesus' face that he needs to see, but the same marks of his suffering. Then he will believe.

What is John trying to tell us here? All of a sudden it feels tremendously important. The risen One turns a mood of desolation into one of

rejoicing, not by coming to his friends and wrapping them in a hug, but by revealing the marks of his most dreadful suffering. The marks he still carries, even in risen form. Apparently resurrection, whatever it means, does not mean an erasure of suffering and scars. It does, however, lead to rejoicing.

I never understood the cynical intellectuals who claimed that religion was the opiate of the people. That it soothed us into brainless comfort, and denied the harsh reality of death by always looking towards an afterlife. The more I learn about world religions, I find that suffering and death is not denied by them, but transformed within them (to go back to our Lenten word). In this past season, particularly during Holy Week, we were not asked to deny death and suffering, but to **look straight at it**. Unflinchingly. We could not ignore the cruelty of the world, or its out of control violence, but needed to acknowledge it, witness it, hear the cries of the innocent, take in the last breath of a beloved.

Think about it. Jesus did not die and then jump off the cross and say "Hey, I'm alive!" immediately following his horrific death. It might have been miraculous, but it would **not** have been the point. He was placed into his grieving mother's arms. He was wrapped in a shroud. He was brought to a tomb and buried in it. This was a death like all deaths – agonizing for family, traumatizing for friends, and a source of despair for his followers.

The resurrection experience was not an "Okay, let's just start where we left off" event. It couldn't be. All hearts had been torn apart the previous week. Jesus' heart had stopped. They were not the same people they were before, emotionally, mentally, physically. Jesus had the marks on his hands and side, but all of them had

been wounded. Their marks were just not as easy to see. It is Thomas who actually comes closest to revealing his wounds in his inability to take in the good news about his friend. He remained a week longer in his devastation and grief. I have always thought that Thomas has been maligned as “Doubting Thomas” for centuries. “Grieving Thomas” would be more accurate.

So how does all this sadness become rejoicing? In some form, Jesus comes to the disciples and wishes them peace. I say “in some form,” because in almost all of the resurrection appearances in scripture, Jesus is never easily recognized. Mary doesn’t recognize him by the tomb until he calls her name. The two friends on the road to Emmaus don’t know the stranger who walks with them, until he stops for supper and breaks the bread. It was only showing his wounds that convinced his closest disciples. Some action is required that tells the mourners that Jesus, his love, his example, his vital spirit is **with them**, in some real and tangible way. The action seals it.

Christ is with them, risen, alive and feeding them still. In fact, in one of the resurrection appearances, he does just that – cooks a breakfast of fish while the others are out on the water. No, they don’t know at first who he is. But they are fed. It makes me think of something Vicki said the other day – she had wanted to bring Betty Collins’ potato peeler to her service this past week. I know for sure, no one who has peeled potatoes for the last 50 years in this church will be able to do it without being visited by Betty, her own potato peeler in hand, doing what she has always done to feed the people. It may not look like her, but she will be there.

We need to go back to the poignant and painful act of Jesus showing his wounds to his friends. With this action, he is saying “Yes, I am he. **I am** the one you saw suffer and die. No, I am not exactly the same as I was before. Suffering changes us. Death undoes us. But it is me in my fullness. I will be with you always as you take what you’ve learned from me and go out to feed the people and change the world.”

Two things I need to say about that. First, though joyful times are great, it is our suffering times that truly make us who we are.

And it is our shared times of suffering that knit a community together ever stronger than before. What the disciples endured with Jesus and the suffering they shared with one another is what made them the strong, compassionate, witnessing, teaching, and healing community that birthed the church. This is what brought forth the “kingdom” of God on earth. It moved them from reeling to rejoicing when they found that Jesus never really left them, but was an essential part of **everything** they did from then on. The early church taught, healed, prayed, and broke bread together in Jesus name, which essentially means in his presence. His very real presence!

Secondly, God has sent me an answer to my initial prayer – “O God, what are you doing with us now?” As I finished this message in a hotel in Gorham, New Hampshire, on the way back from Sid’s funeral, I was thinking of him sitting with us in House Church. Now, it was not easy for him to get there. But for all of his physical impairments, he kept moving, kept going forward, kept giving and loving his new church the best he could. We have suffered all these losses together in five months – Kal, Paul, Lib, Georgia, Avis, Sid, Betty, Lillian, and Inez. Each one of these people seeded this church in their own unique way with life! And this life will appear and sprout among us. Kal’s beautiful smile and kindness, Paul’s strength in adversity, Lib’s love of literature, Georgia’s stately demeanor and sense of history, Avis’s joy and curious mind even amid crippling arthritis, Sid’s commitment, Betty’s tremendous service, Lillian’s graciousness, and Inez’s **courage** and honesty, being the only black woman in an **all too white church** for many years.

They will be a source of spirit and inspiration as we move forward. Never lost to us, they will be holding us up. No one is ever lost in the kingdom of God where all of us, living and dead, are held in one hand. And, as Jesus did, they will bring peace and send us out to be the church. And we will follow their lead. Amen.

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