

Coming to Terms with the Resurrection

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April 19, 2020. After Jesus had been arrested, tortured, and crucified, the disciples waited — hidden away in their Upper Room — and were afraid. We hear this gospel story every year. But this year, we know more than ever what it means to be isolated in our rooms and afraid too. Today's sermon reminds us that even so, the promise of God is still with us.

Reading: [John 20:19-31](#)

*** Transcript ***

Is anyone else tired this week? I will admit that I am. Easter is over, Jesus is risen, the adrenaline of the fast-paced adjustments of the last several weeks has worn off — and I am a little worn out. And yet, all of the reliable sources on the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 indicate that we're not done yet, and we'll be sticking together while staying physically apart for a while yet. The nightly news is not hopeful, for us who long for the widespread testing and successful management of the virus that will allow us to open the doors of our Upper Rooms, and come out safely to resume our regular routines, to travel, to go to parks and movies and museums and restaurants, like we did every day until just five weeks ago. Think about that — just five weeks, and how much has changed.

And I wonder, if the disciples didn't feel a similar weariness, waiting in their Upper Room. The news they heard from outside wasn't good, either. Jesus, their friend, with whom they had eaten the Passover meal, who had washed their feet, who had shared the promise of God's love and forgiveness and mercy, had been arrested. And Jesus was tortured. And murdered. And Jesus had been betrayed by Judas, their friend, who was now dead too. All of the hopes they had for freedom and justice and change in their world had seemingly died, on the cross, with Jesus.

And they, the followers of Jesus that they were, were vulnerable also. Peter especially knew that — he had been noticed, as he waited for word on what was happening to Jesus in the sham trial held by the religious leaders and the Roman occupiers. And he was afraid that he himself, and maybe his family too, would also be arrested by the religious leaders. So afraid that he had denied not only Jesus, but his own ideals and hopes, multiple times, in order to protect himself. They were all afraid.

And so they waited, hidden away in their Upper Room, perhaps the same Upper Room where they had their last meal with Jesus. The witness of Mary Magdalene and Mary, mother of James and John, that Jesus' tomb was empty, corroborated by Peter and the other disciple reporting on the linens left abandoned where Jesus had been buried, and Mary Magdalene's claim that she had actually seen Jesus, could stir hope, but not enough to set them free to leave their place of safety for good, and return to their normal lives. It was all too confusing, too hard to believe.

We hear today's gospel story every year, and it is so familiar. How Jesus came to the disciples as they hid. How Thomas wasn't there, and refused to believe that Jesus had come while he was out. And how, when Jesus came again, Thomas demanded proof from him of who he was, proof of the good news that he brought. And how Jesus invited Thomas to touch his wounds, and Thomas then believed. "Doubting Thomas," as he has been dubbed, gets a bad rap often, in our Easter story. And I always stick up for Thomas, point out how often we too need proof in order to believe, how Jesus sees what Thomas needs, and offers him the opportunity to touch the wounds in his hands, his feet, his side. But this year, as we wait still in our Upper Rooms for good news that will allow us to venture out again, a question

occurred to me about this story of the disciples in their Upper Room.

Where was Thomas, when Jesus came the first time? It's easy to take this for granted, to let it pass as insignificant to the story we are hearing. But in this season of COVID-19, a new light is shed on this throw-away phrase from our gospel. And I wonder, where was Thomas, the so-called doubting one? From our new point of view on this ancient story, from our Upper Rooms, this feels strangely significant. Given the circumstances, I don't think Thomas was out just for fun, attending a party or going to the local baths. I suspect Thomas was out with a purpose, perhaps trying to get news on what was happening, in a world without TV or internet to help the disciples stay informed. Or perhaps he was getting food and supplies, so they would have what they needed while they stayed safely hidden. Thomas may have, for some reason, been least at risk of arrest by the Romans, and so was the one sent out while the rest remained, not having any idea that Jesus was going to come through that locked door.

Having been the one at home and the one to go out during this time of physical distancing, I can imagine how they all felt. Thomas, hearing the whispers of fate that awaited any followers of Jesus, having perhaps seen armed soldiers searching the shops and the streets, having maybe even had to quickly cross the street to avoid coming face-to-face with someone who might betray him, gets back to the Upper Room, breathing a sigh of relief as he locked the door behind him again. And he doesn't have a chance to tell his friends what it's like out there before they tell him the news: Jesus had come while he was out, breathing life into their place of refuge, bringing hope to a situation that felt completely hopeless. How can Thomas reconcile that with what he has just seen?

And the rest of the disciples, having seen Jesus, have had their minds blown, one more time. The hope of being with Jesus, hearing the promises, seeing the miracles, shattered on the cross. And just when they thought there was no way to redeem the situation, Jesus shows them that everything they thought about him, and what he was going to do, was wrong — and right.

Coming to terms with the resurrection isn't something we think about a lot, is it? And yet this year, we know more than ever what it means to be afraid. What it means to be closed away. What it means to long and grieve for nothing more than what has been and what we had hoped for, for the people who we have loved and lost, for what was familiar and comfortable such a short time ago. It takes time, this process, and we are just at the beginning.

And Jesus, he was so patient, so understanding of the fear that the disciples felt, and how hard it would be for them to embrace their new reality and understanding of who Jesus was, who God is. He breathed on them, promised them peace, and came not just once, but many times, as many times as it would take for the disciples to finally get it.

And we are being transformed, as people, as a community of faith, as a human family, just as Thomas and the disciples were transformed. We are being renewed and prepared for something we can't yet imagine or understand. And the promise of God is with us, here and now. There is grief in transformation, and there is hope and life, too. We can be patient with one another, patient with ourselves, and lean on each other through this time. Jesus breathed the Spirit on his disciples, and he breathes on us gathered here this morning. "Peace be with you," my family. Peace be with you. Christ is alive!

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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