

The Gift We All Need

By: Tina Reyes

April 11, 2021. Today's sermon by guest Pastor Tina Reyes is on being more understanding, in this year of all years, of Thomas and the disciples for hiding out in a locked room and struggling with lack of faith and the need for more proof.

Readings: [1 John 1:1-2:2](#), [John 20:19-31](#)

*** Transcript ***

So as I said at the beginning of worship, I bring you greetings from LuMin St. Louis and all the students, and I also bring you greetings from the Central States Synod of the ELCA. It is indeed good to be here with you this morning as we hear the good news.

This past week, a man named Earl Simmons died. I can't say I was really aware of who he was or what his gifts were to the music world, or even his journey, until reports of him being in the hospital and being in a vegetative state hit my social media accounts — and not just the news reports, but the instances of friends and colleagues who listened to his music and who were lamenting about how young he was and how he had struggled with his life and his faith in God through those 50 years. But it was the Reverend Traci Blackmon, who is a UCC pastor in residence across the street at Eden, until she wrote this on her wall about DMX, which was his rap name:

“When I listen to DMX...

I hear the lamentations and psalms lived out loud.

And I wonder if we have sanitized the struggle out of human lives of faith.

We've decided holiness is achievable instead of aspirational.

We hear the stories of the text as victory instead of valiant.

It's clear to me that DMX knows God.

Not that it matters whether I know that or not.

I'm glad I do.

DMX's God is not the God we meet at the finish line...

this is the God who runs the race with us.”

And there it was. (Now mind you I was mostly done with my sermon and I'm like, “Oh! Quote! Cool!”) But there it was: the gift of Easter, of faith, of hope that appeared to me this year in the lesson from John's gospel.

As Jesse told the kids, it's been a week since we proclaimed out loud, “Alleluia! Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!” The alleluia banner is still on the altar here. Let me tilt down so you can see it. There it is. Alleluia! The Easter lilies are behind me, and I have forgotten how fragrant Easter lilies can be in small spaces, especially when you have almost 20 of them. The last church I served was a huge space, and we could have 20 and not really affect me. We've more or less gone back to our lives as they are right now. But in the text this morning, it is the same night. We begin on Easter night. I think it's important to remember that. It's only been a matter of days since the disciples ran in fear, and their rabbi was killed and buried, and just hours, hours since Mary Magdalene came running to the upper room with the news of Jesus' resurrection.

And so I imagine that they're huddled together in this room with the doors locked because they're trying

to process the trauma that they have witnessed. (They wouldn't have used those words, but that's what they're doing — they're trying to process all of these things that have happened.) And so they're together in comfort and community in their grief and questions, because they're wondering: what's next? And: can we believe Mary? And: I don't know how much more of this I can take.

The text hits me in a way this year that it hasn't before — which I believe is a gift in and of itself. You and I have been huddled more or less in small spaces within our immediate communities. I can tell you that that's not a great way to start campus ministry. When you can't actually be in relationship with students, it creates ways. And you have to be creative and you have to be open to different possibilities. And even though we've been huddled in small spaces in our immediate communities, it hasn't stopped trauma and tragedy happening in the world around us. So I imagine the questions the disciples were uttering are probably familiar in our own lives, like: I don't know if I can take much more of this (not really a question but more of a statement). Or: I can't breathe — whether it's from COVID which decimates lungs, or physical restraints cutting off air flow. And there's always that, “What's next?” What's going to happen next? I know I cried that watching angry folks storming the Capitol on January 6th. And I cry that every time I see that legislatures are trying to restrict a transgender person's right to live as God created them.

No beloved, the irony that we've been locked in our own dark upper rooms in fear and anxiety for the last year is not lost on me — and I wonder how long we've really been waiting for the hurt to stop. And even more irony: out of caution and love for each other, here we are sharing worship together — and apart — at the same time, seeking comfort and joining in praise.

And so I have to tell you that this year I'm not even mad at Thomas and the disciples for hiding out in a locked room, or Thomas not being there the first time and then joining them in that locked room. I get it! I get their behavior and their responses. I've pulled back the pointing finger at their lack of faith and the scapegoating of Thomas, his need for more proof. Somehow, this year, I'm with them — waiting with bated breath, wanting to see, to touch, to hear the good news of the risen Christ, just as they did.

And I wonder: where are you, beloved?

In the midst of their pain and their confusion, a wounded, risen Jesus meets them where they are. A wounded, risen Jesus gifts these siblings with exactly what they need in that moment. He breathes peace on them twice, and then he breathes the Holy Spirit in them. And they are comforted in their trauma and grief, and they know that it is indeed their beloved, that Mary was right. And somehow all those prophecies Jesus made, of his death and resurrection, were true.

And it makes sense to me this year, more so than ever, that Thomas didn't get it, isn't comforted by their witness, and is still struggling with his own stuff. Thomas declares that he needs something for himself to begin his own healing, to make it make sense to him. It's not that Thomas doubts. It's that Thomas has always needed something more, something different, to comprehend the love that Jesus offered. And that's okay.

It's okay because there's not one single formula for healing or learning or believing. We live with an amazing diversity of abilities and understandings that were all created by same God. And here we are in this lesson, given a gift that uplifts that diversity. Before I went to seminary I was a middle school history teacher, and I worked with students of all different levels and abilities — from the brightest of the bright, to the students who were just trying to acquire English as a different language, to students who had emotional difficulties. Somehow they all ended up in my class. And in one of the wings in a

teacher workroom, there was a quote put on the wall. And it said, “If the students don’t learn how you teach, then teach how they learn.” And my other favorite thing then is to tell Confirmation students, when we talk about our journey of faith it doesn't have a start and a stop, it's this long journey that lasts our lifetime. It's a journey, and we all take the same journey but differently, because we don't have a socket in the back of our necks, like in the movie “Matrix” (showing my age a little bit) to hook up to the faith computer and to instantly have all the faith and power to comprehend what, in honesty, we just can't.

And so Jesus meets Thomas where Thomas is — still questioning, needing a different way of accessing and understanding the risen Christ. And so the wounded, risen Jesus enters the room a week later (and Thomas is with them) and he offers peace again to all of them, and then he doesn't put Thomas down, as we have done for a bajillion years. He invites Thomas in. He invites Thomas into a relationship, into that close space, and says, “Put your finger here. See? Go ahead, touch.” And that is exactly what Thomas needed for Thomas' journey of healing and living and ministry.

And that is exactly what Jesus — risen, wounded, and healing — does with us in our times of grief, and confusion, and heartache. Jesus meets us where we are and journeys with us in our own needs. And sometimes we don't recognize it as Jesus. Sometimes it's just the person who sits with us. Sometimes it's the stranger a table away (a year ago) who would offer a ketchup bottle or a napkin. Maybe it's an adult offering a verse of encouragement to a young college student struggling with being on their own for the first time. But Jesus meets us where we are, and journeys with us in our own needs.

In our rush to celebrate the risen Christ, I believe that we often forget the pain and suffering and confusion and hurt and heartache — of Jesus and of those who loved him. It's why I believe that every year, on every second Sunday of Easter in the Revised Common Lectionary, we have this lesson. Faith is never about one or the other. Faith is about both and. We get this lesson not as an exemplar of how to believe. We get this lesson as a reminder of God's love for us in the wounded, risen Jesus in our own wounded selves. And we come to know that Jesus is with us wherever we may find ourselves on our journey of faith.

Beloved Jesus died & rose —

the gift that eternal death is not the end.

And Jesus died & rose & comes to us —

that there may be life in this place for all of God's people...

And Jesus meets us in his woundedness & his divinity

and gifts us with his never-ending presence.

And Jesus meets us in our woundedness & divinity

and gifts us with peace and the Holy Spirit.

And Jesus is with us

and gifts us with peace and hope to meet the suffering, and the pain,
and the hardest of the hard stuff.

The gifts given in those upper rooms to the disciples and the gifts given continually to us — of peace and the Holy Spirit — are with us, now and always, as we work to bring death to the sins of racism and white supremacy, and as we learn to welcome and celebrate all folks as God created them in amazingly diverse ways, and as we hold on just a little longer to our quarantines and our safe spaces.

It is indeed the second Sunday of Easter. Jesus is with us and among us. Alleluia. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia! (Yes, there's the fist pump action here.) Thanks be to God!

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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