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*“Peace be with you.”*

*John 20:19-31*

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**John 20:19-31**

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>20</sup>After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ <sup>22</sup>When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup>So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ <sup>27</sup>Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.’ <sup>28</sup>Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ <sup>29</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’



<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

## Sermon:

In John 20, we are given post-resurrection experiences that testify to the new life in Jesus. First, a mourning Mary Magdalene encounters an empty tomb. Rushing off to tell the disciples, Peter and the unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved, enter and find the tomb empty as she had told them. Next, as Mary weeps in her grief and uncertainty, Jesus appears to her and calls her by name. “Mary,” he says. “Teacher!” she exclaims. That very night, Jesus appears behind locked doors to a group of his disciples. “Peace be with you,” he says.

Thomas is not with them.

Tradition would have us call him doubting Thomas. But scripture suggests that he is genuine, forthright, even courageous. In chapter 11, Thomas is the one who urged the disciples to go with Jesus to raise Lazarus, even though it might spell their deaths (John 11:7-16). In chapter 14, when Jesus tells the disciples that he is going on to a place before them, Thomas is the only one who cares enough to interrupt and say, “Lord, we do not know the way” (John 14:5, paraphrased).

And so, I wonder whether Thomas’ “doubt” was part of a larger insistence on dealing with reality, on getting things back to normal, on moving on now that the worst had happened. I mean, why isn’t Thomas in that locked room with the other disciples that first Easter night? Thomas—this is my guess anyway—is out there getting on with his life. Sure, he was mourning. The crucifixion broke Thomas’ heart. But Thomas is a realist. So perhaps he’s out in the real world, figuring out what to do next—attempting to get back to normal.

“We have seen the Lord,” his friends tell him. But Thomas had just seen his Lord, too—on Friday—nailed to a cross in agony and isolation. The joyful, surreal confession of the other disciples must have seemed like wishful thinking to practical Thomas.

And then, one week later, Jesus appears again. This time, Thomas is with the others. “Peace be with you,” Jesus says.

The lectionary places this story on the calendar every year on the Sunday following Easter. As an associate pastor who gets to preach the Sunday following Easter every year (well, Rachel and I trade every other year), I have preached on this passage more than once. Each time, I have always been able to find some new angle or gem to pull out and love about it. But this year, holding this passage in my mind and in my heart, it has somehow felt fuller and heavier than ever before.

This year, what I cherish the most about this story, is that a wounded and scarred Jesus appears to Thomas.



As a good Presbyterian, I'm not generally drawn to the more physical parts of Jesus' crucifixion. Yes, I acknowledge they were real, and I ponder it on Good Friday. But the crosses in our sanctuaries are empty, and the images of a battered Jesus on the cross found in other Christian traditions have never appealed to me. But surprisingly, this year, that's what I love the most.

What I love the most is that Jesus appears to Thomas in a body that is scarred and wounded. A body that openly bears its traumatic history. A body that refuses to hide its suffering, its sorrow, its brokenness. These wounds are not healed. These wounds are so raw that Jesus invites Thomas to put his fingers inside of them.

This is *really* Jesus. Jesus from Friday on the cross. Jesus who felt pain. Jesus who said, "I am with you," and meant it. "I am with you where it hurts. I am with you where you are."

Blogger Debie Thomas points out that Christians love a victory story. We value "the race won, the mountain scaled, the enemy defeated, the obstacle overcome."<sup>i</sup> We like a story of failure every now and then, but only when these stories are shared in retrospect, long after the worst is over. "Sin that has surrendered to holiness? That's a Christian story," she writes. "But sin that clings? Challenges that won't ease up? A wound—physical, psychological, or relational—that remains?" We cringe. We turn our eyes away. We don't like it.

But this year, Jesus' wounded body reminds me that some hurts last. Some pain, loss, and trauma leave traces that nothing can erase. Some wounds remain, even after resurrection.

We feel for Thomas. Because we know there are days when it is hard to believe. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

We can't blame Thomas for wanting to move on, to get back to normal. But when he does see his Lord, his great change is less about coming to faith and more about realizing that after the resurrection, reality has changed and there would be no normal to go back to.

After all, what is "normal" when someone has been raised from the dead? What can possibly be the same? Your work, your sense of purpose, your relationships, your view of the past, present, and future—all of it changed forever that morning in the garden.

So when Jesus finally does appear to Thomas, and Thomas confesses, "My Lord and my God," he is throwing "normal" out the window and opening himself to a very different reality than any he could have imagined.

It's easy for us to focus on the question "How soon until we can get back to normal?" But maybe that's not the right question. Perhaps the right questions should be: What will we learn? How will we be different? What will we carry with us?" Will we take a handshake or a hug for granted? Will we ignore the checkout clerk, the custodian, or the orderly? Will we look past the man or woman in scrubs without considering the sacrifice they are making—their families are



making? Will we forget that we are inextricably bound to each other and dependent on one another?

Two weeks ago, the Washington Post shared a short video of hospital staff at Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, NY.<sup>ii</sup> At the time of the video (recorded on April 1), over 80% of the hospital's 600 patients were infected with COVID-19.

It is a bleak scene. Yet nurse Janett Perez continues to sing to her patients. Lying unconscious in their beds, the intensive care nurse explains, "They can still hear you." The hospital staff is all they have. "They don't have family around. So we have to be their family," she says.

Nurses bustle in the hallways, gowning up and whisking in and out of rooms. They move quickly, purposefully, checking monitors, carefully rearranging limbs and tubing. Nurse Perez explains that she has to keep up the hope that her patients will get better. They have to treat them with the expectation that they will. "I let them know that we're here for them. ... We talk to them. We encourage them. And we're praying for them."

Before each shift begins, these hospital workers get together and pray. Sometimes the group is led by a Jew, other times by a Christian, still others by a Muslim. "Every single morning, we pray together as a team," she says.

Sometimes, it's hard to see Jesus in the midst of chaos. Sometimes, he shows up clear as day.

Barbara Brown Taylor says we have to be detectives for the divine. It is our job as disciples to search for the extraordinary in the ordinary fabric of everyday existence.

Well, our ordinary, everyday existence has changed—is changing. Our normal is not what we could have predicted. Around the world, people are sick, and getting sicker. Doctors and nurses carry battle scars on chapped hands, bruises and sores behind ears and on the bridges of their noses. Children are kept out of school. Passersby give all a wide berth. Elders and immune-compromised are staying indoors and washing off delivered groceries. Jobs are lost and futures are insecure. Retirement savings are falling, and anxieties are rising.

But it is into the closed door of our fearful hearts that Jesus shows up, wounds and all.

We may have to be real detectives—but the divine shows up in disasters.

"Peace be with you," Jesus says.

In 1527, when the plague descended on Wittenberg, people were fleeing the city. In the middle of all the madness, Martin Luther wrote of Jesus' gift of peace. He wrote that peace does not remove us from disaster and death, but Christ gives us peace in the midst of such chaos. God does not promise deliverance from it, but peace within it.



Friends, I believe that God is still at work creating, re-creating, and sustaining us in ways we cannot imagine. I see it in the phone calls our members are making to check in on one another, Zoom youth group meetings, and handwritten notes. I see it in neighbors who check in, and hand-sewn masks that get sent to places in need.

Yes, our “normal” is gone. At least for a while—maybe a long while. While we might feel out of place in this strange “new normal” (“Lord, we do not know the way”) we can trust that Christ goes before us and beside us. “I am the way,” he says.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29b).

Please receive this reading—a poem by the Irish Franciscan priest Father Richard Hendrick.

*Yes there is fear.  
Yes there is isolation.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
Yes there is sickness.  
Yes there is even death.*

*But,  
They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise  
You can hear the birds again.  
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet  
The sky is no longer thick with fumes  
But blue and grey and clear.*

*They say that in the streets of Assisi  
People are singing to each other  
across the empty squares,  
keeping their windows open  
so that those who are alone  
may hear the sounds of family around them.*

*They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland  
Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.  
Today a young woman I know  
is busy spreading fliers with her number  
through the neighbourhood  
So that the elders may have someone to call on.*

*Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples  
are preparing to welcome*



*and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary  
All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting  
All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way  
All over the world people are waking up to a new reality  
To how big we really are.  
To how little control we really have.  
To what really matters.  
To Love.*

*So we pray and we remember that  
Yes there is fear.  
But there does not have to be hate.  
Yes there is isolation.  
But there does not have to be loneliness.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
But there does not have to be meanness.  
Yes there is sickness.  
But there does not have to be disease of the soul  
Yes there is even death.  
But there can always be a rebirth of love.  
Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.*

*Today, breathe.  
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic  
The birds are singing again  
The sky is clearing,  
Spring is coming,  
And we are always encompassed by Love.*

*Open the windows of your soul  
And though you may not be able  
to touch across the empty square,  
Sing.*

*— Fr. Richard Hendrick, OFM  
March 13, 2020*

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<sup>i</sup> Debie Thomas, "Unless I See," JourneywithJesus.net (posted April 12, 2020).

<sup>ii</sup> Lenny Bernstein and John Gerberg, "A Brooklyn ICU amid a pandemic: patients alone, comforted by nurses and doctors," "The Washington Post" online ([www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com), April 4, 2020).

